

Wildfires Aren't Just A Threat To People—They're Killing Off Earth's Biodiversity



*Reynard Loki - Photo:
Independent Media Institute*

Cataclysmic wildfires have increased in intensity and frequency due to climate change.

In early August 2023, a succession of wildfires ignited within the state of Hawaii, primarily affecting the island of Maui. It is [considered](#) “one of the worst natural disasters in Hawaii’s history, and the nation’s deadliest wildfires since 1918.” Driven by powerful winds, these fires sparked urgent evacuations, inflicted extensive devastation, and tragically [claimed](#) the lives of at least 115 individuals—though the final confirmed death toll may never be known due to the severity of the fires and the [lack](#) of DNA evidence to identify the victims. In the town of Lāhainā, as many as 850 people were [reported](#) missing by Hawaii officials as of August 21. The rapid spread of these wildfires was linked to the arid, gusty weather conditions [generated](#) by a robust high-pressure system located north of Hawaii, combined with the influence of Hurricane Dora from the southern region. This nightmare scenario in Hawaii is not unique.

In 2020, the catastrophic wildfires that raged across [California, Oregon, and Washington state](#) consumed around 5 million acres of dry forest. “I drove 600 miles up and down the state, and I never escaped the smoke,” Senator Jeff

Merkley (D-Or) [said](#) on the ABC News television show “This Week” on September 13, 2020. “We have thousands of people who have lost their homes. I could have never envisioned this.”

The firefighters on America’s West Coast were battling the deadly blazes as the [75th session of the United Nations General Assembly](#) convened in September 2020 at the UN headquarters in New York. One of the high-level meetings as part of the session was the [Summit on Biodiversity](#). Strikingly, the hot-button issue of wildfires was not mentioned in the event program, even though wildfires [continue](#) to pose a direct threat to biodiversity across the planet. According to the [Living Planet Report 2020](#) by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), populations of monitored mammals, fish, birds, reptiles, and amphibians have collectively dwindled by nearly 70 percent worldwide from 1970 to 2016. The underlying cause: humanity.

Wildfires’ Impact on Biodiversity

The Hawaiian rainforests of Kauai once teemed with ‘akikiki, small songbirds cloaked in gray plumage. But when humans came to the island, they inadvertently introduced mosquitoes carrying avian malaria. “With no immunity to the disease, ‘akikiki and other native songbirds began to die off. The species’ population crashed in the early 2000s, and today, the situation is so dire that scientists estimate [just five ‘akikiki exist in the wild](#) in Kauai,” [stated](#) an August 2023 article in the Smithsonian Magazine.

The species’ survival is in the hands of scientists on a nearby island, at the Maui Bird Conservation Center, which houses approximately 40 ‘akikiki and actively encourages them to breed in captivity, according to the [article](#). This facility also provides shelter to around 40 ‘alalā, the Hawaiian crow, which has vanished from its natural habitat. Thankfully, the center’s avian residents were [rescued](#) from the August wildfires. Still, the episode highlights the increasing risk wildfires pose to the survival of wildlife, particularly the danger they cause to species already on the brink of extinction.

Cataclysmic wildfires—the [intensity and frequency of which have increased due to human-caused climate change](#)—are not just an American phenomenon. In the summer of 2023, catastrophic wildfires [swept](#) through Maui, Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Algeria, Tunisia, and Canada. And wildfires impact far more than human life, trees, and the built environment; Countless wild animals have perished in the flames. “[A]s many as [1.25 billion animals](#)—including iconic Australian species

such as koalas, kangaroos, wallabies, and gliders—have been killed or displaced by the fires,” Earth | Food | Life (EFL) reporter Robin Scher [wrote](#) on Truthout in April 2020 about Australia’s “[Black Summer](#),” the colloquial name of the 2019-2020 Australian bushfire season, which was unusually intense. “In some instances, certain species may have even gone extinct,” Scher [reported](#).

Writing about the Amazon wildfires for Truthout, EFL reporter Daniel Ross [noted](#) in June 2020 that the “illegal logging, encroachment from agribusinesses, and profit-driven government policies,” that underpin Brazil’s wildfires, [impacted](#) wildlife, [threatened](#) Indigenous communities, and created an [air pollution-related health crisis](#) in the nation’s urban areas. The fires even [spread into virgin forests](#) in the country.

Wildfires Linked to Cattle Farming

In addition, the fires—[many of which are illegally started](#) to create pasture for cows that supply Brazil’s multibillion-dollar beef industry—have created a dangerous situation for the global climate. “[R]esearch suggests that some deforested regions of the rainforest are exhaling more carbon dioxide than they’re taking in,” Ross [reported](#).

And make no mistake, a rapidly and unnaturally changing climate is a direct threat to the planet’s biodiversity, and to the variety of life on Earth that provides the foundation for a host of life-supporting ecological services—such as clean air, clean water, healthy soil, and crops, plant pollination, pest control, wastewater treatment, and outdoor recreation.

A Vicious Cycle

There is a vicious cycle at work: While wildfires are destroying biodiversity, biodiversity loss may contribute to increased susceptibility to wildfires. According to a 2016 [study](#) published in the journal *Animal Conservation*, the extinction of medium-sized, ground-dwelling mammals in Australia could be a factor that primes the bush to burn more easily.

“Australia has seen the extinction of 29 of 315 terrestrial mammal species in the last 200 years and several of these species were ecosystem engineers whose fossorial actions may increase the rate of leaf litter breakdown,” [wrote](#) Matt Hayward, the lead author of the report, and his co-authors, in the report’s abstract. “Thus, their extinction may have altered the rate of litter accumulation

and therefore fire ignition potential and rate of spread.”

Hayward [argued](#) that restoring biodiversity could help reduce the likelihood of wildfires starting and spreading rapidly.

Advocacy Groups Call for Action

Some organizations are fighting against the indiscriminate deforestation resulting from cattle farming activities that have fueled the wildfires in the Amazon forest. Amnesty International [reported](#) that “63 percent of the [Brazilian Amazon] deforested from 1988 to 2014 has become pasture for cattle—a land area five times the size of Portugal.” The group has called for ending illegal cattle farming in the Amazon. “Illegal cattle ranching is the main driver of Amazon deforestation. It poses a very real threat, not only to the human rights of Indigenous and traditional peoples who live there but also to the entire planet’s ecosystem,” [said](#) Richard Pearshouse in 2019, when he was the head of crisis and environment at Amnesty International.

Care2 launched a [public petition](#) in 2020 urging the Brazilian government to stop allowing these human-created fires destroying the Amazon rainforest. As of July 2023, the petition has garnered more than 122,000 signatures.

In 2020, Brazilian meat giant JBS pledged it would introduce, by 2025, a [new system to monitor](#) both its direct and indirect cattle suppliers. However, Amnesty criticized the announcement, [saying](#) the “timeline [was] too far removed.” The group pointed out that “JBS has been aware of the risks that cattle illegally grazed in protected areas may enter its supply chain since at least 2009, and [previously pledged to monitor its indirect suppliers by 2011.](#)”

Sustainable Environment Named a ‘Human Right’

In October 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) [recognized](#) for the first time “that having a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is a human right.” The proposed text, put forth by Costa Rica, the Maldives, Morocco, Slovenia, and Switzerland, was approved with 43 votes in favor and four abstentions. The abstaining countries were Russia, India, China, and Japan.

Michelle Bachelet, who was at the time the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, had long supported the move. After the vote, she [said](#) “that she was ‘gratified’ that the decision ‘clearly recognizes environmental degradation and climate change as interconnected human rights crises,’” adding that “Bold action

is now required to ensure this resolution on the right to a healthy environment serves as a springboard to push for transformative economic, social and environmental policies that will protect people and nature.”

BirdLife International, a global partnership of non-governmental organizations working to conserve birds and their habitats, while seeking a resolution by the UN General Assembly reaffirming the rights recognized by the UNHRC, [said](#) that “to emerge from [the climate and biodiversity]... crises, to ensure our future and that of the planet, we need to entirely transform humanity’s relationship with nature. This human right helps make that happen.”

Wildfires Predicted to Increase

“The choking smoke cast a dark pall over the skies and created a vision of climate-change disaster that made worst-case scenarios for the future a terrifying reality for the present,” [reported](#) the New York Times about the wildfires that blazed across the Western United States in 2020. That terrifying reality could go on for generations if we don’t get a handle on the climate crisis.

In September 2022, climate journalist and native Oregonian Emma Pattee [wrote](#) in the New York Times that “[c]limate scientists estimate that the frequency of large wildfires [could increase](#) by over 30 percent in the next 30 years and over 50 percent in the next 80 years, thanks in large part to drought and extreme heat caused by climate change.” That is a frightening prospect not just for humans but for the countless nonhuman animals with whom we share this planet.

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Sustainability Is Not As New An Idea As You Might Think—It's More Than 300 Years Old



Erika Schelby -
Academia.edu

Modern sustainability evolved from forest management of the 18th century, and its ancient roots go back even further. Could it help with today's climate crisis and lumber shortage?

The proverb “necessity is the mother of invention” has roots that go back to Aesop’s fable “[The Crow and the Pitcher](#)” and to Plato’s “[Republic](#).” It is realistic to assume that Hans Carl von Carlowitz, mining manager for the Saxon court in Freiberg, Germany, during the late 17th and early 18th centuries, was also driven by necessity and a severe shortage of wood to invent the concept of [sustainability](#)

(“*Nachhaltigkeit*”).

Or to be more precise, he coined the word to describe the quintessential principles of a human activity that goes back to the dawn of history: the sustainable use of natural resources. Although it may not have been called sustainability until Carlowitz, societies had practiced it for a long time as a vital part of cultural or religious practices. Ancient Egypt pursued sustainable systems for more than [3,000 years](#). The Maya, according to anthropologist Lisa Lucero, practiced a “[cosmology of conservation](#).” The literature of ancient India is brimful with references to the [preservation of the environment](#).

On the other hand, there are ancient civilizations that may have collapsed because they despoiled the natural world that gave them life. The earliest example may be found in the ancient Mesopotamian “Epic of Gilgamesh,” the first version of which dates back to 2000 B.C. Clay tablets tell the tale of vast cedar forests cut down by the eponymous hero in defiance of the gods, who punish him by cursing the land with fire and drought, turning the region into a desert. Nothing grew anymore, forcing the Sumerians to flee to Babylon and Assyria.

Now, 300 years after Carlowitz gave sustainability its modern name when Europe was short on wood, we have again experienced a timber shortage—this one triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and caused by climate change.

The modern concept of sustainable living on a planet with limited resources evolved from the work done by Carlowitz regarding the need for the sustainable management of forests.

In 1713, just a year before his death, Carlowitz published the 432-page folio book, *Sylvicultura Oeconomica oder Anweisung zur wilden Baum-Zucht* (“Silvicultural Oeconomica or the Instructions for Wild Tree Cultivation”).

Sylvicultura Oeconomica documented the beginning of scientific forestry. It also invented sustainability, which had to be accepted to assure the continuity of human societies and of nature. Without scientific forestry, people across Europe and around the world would have faced far more severe economic and social disasters than the ones witnessed in the last few centuries. “In the beginning was the Earth,” said [Christof Mauch](#), a modern-day German sustainability specialist and historian, in a 2013 lecture. “The Earth does not need humans to survive, but humans need the Earth.”

In fact, Carlowitz envisioned the [three pillars of sustainability](#): environmental, economic, and social justice. He rejected short-term thinking. He offered solutions, scientific details, guidelines and practical proposals on how to save, select, nurse, plant, re-grow, maintain and protect forests and their biodiversity. He presented an inventory of conditions across Europe and discussed threats caused by extreme weather conditions, diseases, pests and humans. He pled for careful, frugal consumption and recommended the art of saving timber. His ideas for using energy-efficient stoves in housing or furnaces in smelters, tips on improving the insulation in buildings, and finding substitutes like peat for heating homes are not unlike today's sustainability efforts. The main part of the book deals with the urgent work that needs to be done to overcome the *Holznot*, or wood emergency. In his 2010 book, German journalist Ulrich Grober calls *Sylvicultura Oeconomica* "[the birth certificate of our modern concept of sustainability](#)."

These concepts developed by Carlowitz have been adopted across the globe in the course of the last 300 years. Unfortunately, today the rapid deforestation of large areas continues unabated in various regions, mostly in the Global South. The developed Global North had already done much of its massive deforestation during the era of industrialization. It should be noted that today, the greed of wealthy individuals, corporations and governments from the rich countries often exacerbate the climate crisis in tropical regions, while [Indigenous peoples](#) and those who are not in positions of power due to lack of access to capital or being located in the Global South (particularly island nations) often have proven, long-term [sustainable forest management and environmental practices](#) and are most [affected by the unsustainable practices of developed nations](#).

But the rich world has been reeling from the climate impacts of unsustainable development for decades, with [increasing temperatures and a rise in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events](#). In many ways, we are losing a race against time. During the summer of 2021 in the United States, firefighters [wrapped](#) aluminum foil around the trunk of a giant old sequoia, hoping to save the world's largest tree from "a raging wildfire" in California. Sequoias, which can [live](#) for up to 3,400 years, have coexisted with occasional forest fires for millennia. They don't burn easily and have survived wildfires over the years, even benefitting from fires that clear away the underbrush, creating new space and providing the required sunlight for seedlings. But this no longer works. The new

wildfires of the climate change era last too long and burn too hot even for these huge trees, who were once regarded as invulnerable. According to the [New York Times](#), “in last year’s Castle fire, between 7,000 and 11,000 large sequoias died across the Sierra Nevada or about 10 to 14 percent of them.”

All these natural calamities have come in a cluster, bundled together in the last few years: the pandemic, ever more and ever bigger forest fires in the West and leaping north into Canada, [excessive](#) heat, lasting drought and the destruction of millions of trees by a tiny creepy-crawly bark-eating beetle. Businesses closed their doors, sawmills halted production, truckers stopped trucking and logistical bottlenecks multiplied. Builders ceased construction and people were stuck in lockdowns at home.

Then, contrary to expectations, a DIY frenzy broke out. Confined to their houses or apartments because of pandemic-related restrictions, Americans started to improve their private spaces. Perhaps they felt it was the only reality they could count on. It was something they valued as a zone of safety and personal freedom in the midst of turmoil: a room of one’s own.

Wood became a high-demand commodity. Trading at [\\$381 for 1,000 board feet](#) back in 2019, in May of 2021 lumber hit a [record high of \\$1,711.20](#). Costs for lumber have come down again, but house prices have not. According to the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), “the average price of a newly constructed single-family home [has increased by about \\$ 36,000 since April of 2020.](#)”

It’s a vicious cycle: trees are stressed by heat and drought, which makes them less resilient. A cold climate used to keep the mountain pine beetles under control but warming temperatures have upset the balance and increased their numbers. With more mouths to feed, the beetles advanced into new areas, attacked weakened trees, and have already devastated 27 million hectares of forest across North America “[an area more than three quarters the size of Germany.](#)”

There are also more and more people who are directly confronted by climate change. [The Washington Post reports](#) that “[n]early 1 in 3 Americans live in a county hit by a weather disaster in the past three months... On top of that, 64 percent live in places that experienced a multiday heat wave.”

So how long can people function and be productive under the present and

increasingly worse circumstances? How can governments govern? When will the governed discover that the powerful Wizard of Oz isn't so mighty after all?

Americans are still embedded in a never-ending stream of the same-old growth and consumption messages that contradict what society as a whole must do to become sustainable. But finally, there is a shift in public awareness. According to the Yale Program on Climate Communication, "[three out of four Americans now believe that global warming is happening today.](#)" It is hard to tell if this change of mind will last; public opinion is fickle, and there is the fact of a short attention span.

Perhaps it is helpful to acknowledge that the world was in trouble before, and that, driven by necessity 300 years ago, it found solutions. The challenges being faced by people across the globe are far bigger today, but the tools available to them are better too. The world has added much science, and people should have a better understanding of how nature and societies work.

Three scientists were awarded and share the Nobel Prize for physics 2021: Syukuro Manabe of Princeton, Klaus Hasselmann of the Max Planck Institute in Hamburg, Germany, and Giorgio Parisi of the Sapienza University of Rome, Italy. All three of them did long-term groundbreaking work related to complex physical systems and modeling the Earth's climate.

Hans Carl von Carlowitz had no access to such advanced science. All he had was his observation, the science of his time, and a bold mind. But he would most certainly agree with the physicist Giorgio Parisi, who commented on [the timing of the awarding of the Nobel Prize in physics to climate change researchers](#): "It is clear that for the future generations, we have to act now in a very fast way and not with a strong delay." We've had sustainability concepts for more than 300 years—it's certainly past time to utilize them.

Byline:

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Profit Trumps People And Planet In Brazil's Eucalyptus Industry



Brazil is set to unleash several varieties of genetically engineered eucalyptus, which will worsen a bad situation.

Valued for its termite-resistant wood for building purposes, pulp to create products like writing and toilet paper, and its oil, which has numerous health and household benefits, the eucalyptus tree generates big business worldwide. Native to Australia and Tasmania, the prehistoric tree has been planted in such volumes that eucalyptus plantations cover some [25 million hectares](#) around the globe—[larger than the entire land area of the United Kingdom](#). By 2028, according to forecasts, the global eucalyptus oil market is projected to exceed [\\$213 million](#), while the worldwide market for eucalyptus pulp will expand to nearly [\\$17 billion](#).

But the eucalyptus industry has a dark side. Eucalyptus plantations growing in regions spanning South America, southern Africa, southern Europe, and Australia have significant detrimental impacts on local communities and biodiversity. Communities located near eucalyptus plantations are likely to face water shortages—as these plantations utilize [huge amounts](#) of water—and pollution from agrochemicals, including exposure to glyphosate, which has been linked to various health problems, including [increased cancer risk](#).

In addition, the presence of eucalyptus trees' leaves and roots hinders the growth of other plants beneath them because they contain a [biocidal oil](#) that inhibits the survival and decomposition of most soil bacteria that come into contact with them.

Brazil is the world's [largest](#) eucalyptus producer. With an estimated [7.6 million hectares of eucalyptus plantations](#), Brazil maintains [30 percent](#) of the world's total eucalyptus trees. In eastern Brazil, particularly in the states of Bahia and Espírito Santo, these plantations have [replaced](#) the diverse and endemic Atlantic Forest ecosystem, with some municipalities seeing [nearly three-quarters](#) of their land area being covered by eucalyptus plantations. Large corporations such as Suzano, Fibria, and Veracel dominate this industry, exporting eucalyptus as pulp for manufacturing products like toilet paper.

New Forest Threat: Genetically Engineered Eucalyptus

Genetically engineered (GE) varieties of eucalyptus trees are poised to exacerbate a new wave of ecological and social destruction. Brazil has [approved seven varieties](#) of genetically engineered trees. Current plantations rob regions of water, destroy wildlife habitat, and [transform](#) large swaths of land within the Cerrado—an expansive, biodiverse tropical biome situated in eastern Brazil—into unnatural, destructive monoculture farms: rows upon rows of non-native eucalyptus trees without vegetation in their understory. Many traditional communities and [Indigenous people](#) have opposed the spread of these plantations in the country.

Varieties of GE eucalyptus are pesticide-resistant and are likely to increase the use of toxic chemicals such as Roundup, the glyphosate-based weedkiller developed by Monsanto in the 1970s, which is the world's most used herbicide—and was acquired by Bayer in 2018. Other engineered traits, such as increased growth rates, could make the trees more profitable for the pulp and

paper industry but significantly more harmful to the environment.

International Opposition to GE Eucalyptus

The [Campaign to STOP GE Trees](#) is an international alliance of organizations working to halt the introduction of genetically engineered trees into the natural environment to prevent ecological destruction and harm to local communities. It is an initiative of our U.S.-based organization, [Global Justice Ecology Project](#) (GJEP), with support from the Uruguay-based [World Rainforest Movement](#), which advances the cause of social justice in the forests.

An international delegation of the campaign, which was organized by GJEP, traveled to Brazil in July 2023 to meet with Indigenous and [quilombola communities](#) (descendants of escaped Afro-Brazilian enslaved people), members of the [Landless Workers' Movement](#) (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, or MST, in Portuguese), government ministries, and academics. The delegation's goal was to learn about the history of resistance against the pulp and paper industry in the country and discuss how herbicide-resistant genetically engineered varieties of eucalyptus trees could increase the use of toxic herbicides and amplify ecological degradation, health impacts, and social injustice.

[FASE](#) (*Federação de Órgãos para Assistência Social e Educacional*), a group that has been supporting communities opposing eucalyptus plantations for a decade, organized the logistics of the delegation, which included representatives from Argentina, Canada, Chile, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States. Local representatives joined the delegation as it visited several Brazilian ministries to register official demands and testimonies from quilombola and MST community members from northern Espírito Santo and southern Bahia about the devastating impacts of eucalyptus plantations as well as new threats posed by GE eucalyptus trees.

“The demands that we recorded were from several MST communities that we met with that are doing important agroecological work and have a whole agroecological school training people in the region about how to grow organically,” said [Anne Petermann](#), international coordinator of the Campaign to STOP GE Trees. She noted that “there were also statements from members of traditional quilombola communities in that region who are suffering, very directly, the impacts of eucalyptus plantations.”

The delegation also officially presented petitions from [Rainforest Rescue](#), an environmental nonprofit based in Hamburg, Germany, signed by more than [100,000](#) people opposing the release of GE eucalyptus in Brazil to the ministries and Brazilian National Technical Commission on Biosafety.

During the delegation's official meeting, Moisés Savian, secretary of Brazil's Ministry of Agrarian Development, [identified corporate interests](#) driving the push for GE eucalyptus.

"It makes no sense in my vision to have a transgenic [eucalyptus] associated with glyphosate," [stated](#) Savian. His comments highlighted the increasingly ubiquitous and dangerous as well as probable cancer-causing herbicide Roundup. "It is much more linked to market interests of the corporations that want to sell herbicide," the secretary noted.

The Kafkaesque Incentive of Carbon Credits

Another motivation behind the push for GE eucalyptus is the Kafkaesque incentive of receiving carbon credits for planting trees. Corporations like Suzano—which has been called the "[world's largest pulp exporter](#)"—can be rewarded for planting enormous industrial tree monocultures—since they are technically planting trees, they are eligible for carbon credits—even though they first clear-cut and remove the carbon-dense native forests, which release vast amounts of carbon from the forest and the soil.

The pulp industry in Brazil has accelerated the growth rate of their eucalyptus trees. This is increasing the already enormous demands on water resources. So problematic is the expansion of eucalyptus monocultures on the hydrology and biodiversity of regions that they are often called "[green deserts](#)."

"They look green from a distance but are extremely fast-growing trees planted in perfect rows and columns optimal for mechanical harvesting. The huge plantations do not harbor wildlife, and the only biodiversity you find in them is ants and termites," explained Petermann, who led the delegation that traveled to Brazil.

One of the most insidious trends in false solutions to climate change is the idea that living or biological carbon can offset fossil fuel carbon. An expanding landscape of monoculture industrial tree plantations in Brazil—which rob the forests of biodiversity, displace communities and wildlife, and deplete regions of

water resources—epitomizes the eco-swindle of carbon credits.

João, a member of a quilombola community, told the delegation that when eucalyptus started being planted in Espírito Santo and Bahia, “they removed the native plant cover and all the nutrients from the soil. People [here] used to do agroforestry, would use cover crops, [and would] let the land rest—but now, with eucalyptus, there is no rest for the soil.” The total eucalyptus plantation area in Bahia is estimated to be about [658,000 hectares](#), positioning it as the country’s third-largest contributor to industrially cultivated eucalyptus.

Dr. Ricarda Steinbrecher, a biologist from the University of London who attended a forum hosted by the delegation, warned of unintended consequences of genetically engineered trees, stating that “the risks of GE trees is extremely high in terms of the impact on biodiversity, the people living around it, and the global ecosystem and climate.”

Not only are current eucalyptus plantations destructive, but the premise that they are superior to natural forests for capturing carbon is also unsound. In 2020, experts [published](#) a letter with the Institute of Physics stating that “forests are superior to, and irreplaceable by, plantations as agents of terrestrial C [carbon] sequestration.” They are harvested with incredibly short growing cycles for pulp and paper production, which releases the carbon back into the atmosphere. But the scheme is profitable for Suzano and other pulp companies since they profit from the production of pulp and paper as well as carbon credits for planting trees.

Belém Declaration

Brazil is home to numerous biomes, the most famous of which is the Amazon forest. Known as “[the lungs of the Earth](#)” for the massive amounts of carbon dioxide the forest inhales and the oxygen it exhales, the Amazon is the focus of many conservation initiatives and agreements.

In early August 2023, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva [hosted](#) the Amazon Summit in Belém, the capital of the Brazilian state of Pará, during which another conservation agreement was launched. The eight nations party to the [Amazon Cooperation Treaty](#) (ACT) released the [Belém Declaration](#), a document aimed to unify the shared objectives of the signatory nations, which are focused on preserving the Amazon and the rights of Indigenous people who live in it. The United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP30) is [slated](#) to meet in Belém

in 2025.

In a [press release](#), however, the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) stated that the Belém Declaration fell short of commitments to end deforestation in the Amazon and failed to address the issues related to the continued use of fossil fuels.

Nikki Reisch, director of CIEL's Climate and Energy Program, [stated](#):

"The Belém Declaration does not commit... to ending deforestation by 2030, or to addressing the primary, intersecting drivers of rainforest loss—industrial agriculture and the extractive and destructive industries that expose primary forests to land conversion."

"Glaringly absent from the declaration is any mention of the threat that continued production and use of oil and gas poses to the Amazon and the ecosystems, communities, and climate that depend on it. Instead, exploration and development of new oil and gas projects continue—even at the mouth of the Amazon itself—directly undercutting leaders' pledges to prevent the region from reaching the point of no return. Allowing expansion of fossil fuel extraction in the Amazon is incompatible with human rights, including Indigenous Peoples' rights, biodiversity protection, and climate goals."

Similar deference to industry interests plagues the Cerrado, where eucalyptus plantations and agribusiness continue to run roughshod over Indigenous and traditional communities and destroy a lesser-known but equally precarious natural ecological system regardless of ostensible ecological concerns and overtures.

The Demand for Paper Pulp

As the [global demand for paper pulp continues to climb](#), Brazil is expected to be the site of the most significant expansion of these production facilities in South America.

Two regions that the Campaign to STOP GE Trees' delegation visited are likely to face the negative impacts of the tremendous growth of eucalyptus plantations to feed the pulp and paper industry.

Quilombola communities the delegation met with stated that in Espírito Santo,

most of the municipal land has been turned into plantations by Suzano. They also explained that tax incentives and infrastructure investment in the Três Lagoas region by local and federal governments seek to attract investments by the pulp and paper industry to the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, where much of the native Cerrado forest has been converted to eucalyptus plantation in the past decade.

It is so lucrative that Suzano is [building](#) the world's largest pulp and paper mill in Mato Grosso do Sul. The enormous facility is being built by [10,000 workers](#), most of whom are stacked in nearby man camps. The mill is expected to employ [10,000 people](#) when completed. The Cerrado Project, as Suzano has deemed it, is in a rural town that has a [population of nearly 25,000](#). The project threatens grave environmental damage to natural habitat and biodiversity, water and air, and a devastatingly precipitous population influx.

Additionally, the Chilean corporation Arauco is [planning](#) an even larger mill in Mato Grosso do Sul after the scheduled completion of Suzano's behemoth.

Robbing Land From Indigenous Communities

Land sovereignty of traditional communities has been a politically charged issue in Brazil, and the encroachment on lands belonging to traditional and Indigenous communities by agribusiness was a theme that the delegation heard repeated during its travels through Brazil, including in the affected areas of Espírito Santo, southern Bahia, and Mato Grosso do Sul. Born out of Brazil's colonial past and decades of military dictatorship, land distributions in the country are highly inequitable. Agribusiness interests have been incredibly aggressive in the past and continue with this trend currently.

"What made us lose our land, our culture, was all those persecutions by agribusiness," [stated José De Souza](#), an instructor at the Indigenous Ofaié school in Mato Grosso do Sul. The Ofaié was "once a large people," he said, noting that such agribusiness pressures almost made "them extinct." Once having a population of tens of thousands, the Ofaié now live on a mere 45 hectares after being forcibly relocated twice. "It's not an ended thing," [said](#) Souza. "They destroyed our forests and water." The school where Souza teaches emphasizes Ofaié culture and language in classes often taught outside in the open. The Ofaié land is small but is an oasis of native forest hemmed in by vast stretches of industrial monoculture plantations.

The Struggle for Land: The MST

Eucalyptus is as central to the Ofaié land struggle as it is to the MST, one of the most significant movements in South America. The group has nearly [2 million members](#), with hundreds of thousands of Brazil's poor living in MST camps as farmers. The MST seeks to reverse Brazil's profound inequality of land distribution by occupying land for communal farms.

The movement is a lightning rod of controversy in Brasilia, with lawmakers aligned with former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro trying to [outlaw the movement](#). Still, judges have often accepted the MST's interpretation of Brazilian law that allows unproductive land to be taken. The MST has occasionally included eucalyptus plantations as meeting the definition of "[unproductive](#)" and has occupied and repurposed them for communal farms.

The movement has been so successful in its occupation strategy that it is estimated that [460,000 families](#) now live in encampments started by the campaign. The MST is forward-leaning with an eye to the future with agroecology schools that teach how to grow crops and food using agroecological methods. They are now the [largest exporters](#) of organic rice in Latin America.

Biden Administration Funding Eucalyptus Expansion

As the MST, Indigenous people, and traditional communities in Brazil struggle against the spread of industrial eucalyptus plantations, the Biden administration is reportedly funding its expansion.

According to a June 2023 [article](#) on Mongabay, "[Biden promised](#) funds from the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation to conserve the Amazon and other critical Latin American biomes." Yet according to findings published by Mongabay, the debt investment, if approved by Congress, will primarily "be funneled into mass-produced eucalyptus in Brazil's Cerrado savanna."

Mongabay reported that [\\$50 million](#) of the funding would go to Timberland Investment Group's (TIG) plan to expand its "planted forest operations," which located its newest office near Suzano's Cerrado Project in Mato Grosso do Sul.

PL 490: Curtailing Indigenous Land Rights

During the delegation's visit to Brazil's capital, Brasilia, to meet with ministers

and lawmakers, Indigenous peoples held a [large demonstration](#) to oppose a proposal, [PL 490](#), a law its supporters claim would bring certainty and fairness to land disputes in Brazil. Opponents, however, argue that the proposal would actually reverse hard-fought gains by Indigenous communities to have their land rights officially recognized.

Proposed by Bolsonaro-aligned lawmakers, PL 490 would reset Indigenous land claims to October 1988—when the current Brazilian Constitution was adopted after the military dictatorship. Since the lands were taken during the dictatorship, this is a land-grabbing ruse by extractive industries seeking to deny claims of land rights by Indigenous groups and even to erase gains they had made in the past. The Lower House of Congress gave its [approval](#) to this bill in May 2023.

The push for PL 490 underscores how land sovereignty is a fundamental issue in Brazilian politics and is inextricably linked to the country's environment and the rights of traditional communities. Monoculture eucalyptus plantations play a central role in the contest over land rights, an issue central to Brazilian politics and ultimately connected to the rights of traditional communities and the world's environmental health. With the specter of eucalyptus trees engineered for pesticide resistance and the Biden administration's embrace of false solutions to climate change, the balance is being further tipped in favor of the pulp and paper industry in that fight.

"As Brazil goes, so does the world when it comes to the use of GE-engineered eucalyptus," said Petermann. "The significance of the loss of the Cerrado to GE eucalyptus plantations cannot be overstated."

Byline:

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Orin Langelle is the director of [Langelle Photography](#). His first assignment was photographing Vietnam War protests during the [1972 Republican National](#)

[Convention](#) in Miami Beach, Florida. He formally studied with Cornell Capa, former executive director of the [International Center of Photography](#) in New York. Langelle has photographed on six continents, worked in strategic communications, and co-founded [Global Justice Ecology Project](#).

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Private Military Companies Continue To Expand In Africa



Photo: eng.wikipedia.org

The recent coup in Niger threatens to unleash more private military and security companies on a continent where they have become steadily more powerful in recent decades.

In the wake of the July 26 coup in Niger, the world's spotlight has once again turned to the expansion of private military and security companies (PMSCs)

across Africa. Following the removal of the [relatively pro-Western government](#), Niger's new military rulers [asked Russian PMSC Wagner](#) to help defend against a possible military intervention by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [warning of the PMSC](#) seeking to exploit the instability.

In a continent marked by decades of post-colonial turmoil, PMSCs have steadily gained influence, evolving from their historical role as mercenaries into powerful, corporate-driven forces. As the Sahel region continues to grapple with instability and conflict, the strengthening of PMSCs, both domestic and foreign, will continue to reshape Africa's security in profound and unpredictable ways.

Africa's experience with PMSCs dates back to the decolonization period after World War II. Though mercenaries had been [steadily sidelined in conflicts for centuries](#), rag-tag groups of privateers emerged as shadowy accomplices to colonial powers, aiding in suppressing rebellions and fomenting unrest while providing a degree of ambiguity. Britain's "[Mad Mike](#)" Hoare and France's [Bob Denard](#) came to exemplify this era through their active involvement in military operations that undermined the sovereignty of African states.

The end of the Cold War ushered in a new chapter for PMSCs. With millions of demobilized soldiers seeking employment and civil conflicts on the rise [in the early 1990s](#), these entities evolved into more corporate forms. The South African PMSC Executive Outcomes (EO), [founded in 1989](#) by Eeben Barlow, gained notoriety by accepting contracts to protect energy infrastructure in Angola and to fight Sierra Leone's civil war.

Pressure from South Africa's post-apartheid government led to the [disbandment of EO in 1998](#). But other PMSCs had emerged, including [Sandline International](#), also financed by EO backer Anthony Buckingham and Canadian businessman Rakesh Saxena, that helped gain control over mineral rights in Sierra Leone. And after Washington began to lean heavily on PMSCs during the wars in [Afghanistan and Iraq](#), the taboo of using them was broken.

Existing in a [legal gray zone](#), PMSCs have leveraged their strategic capabilities worldwide—no more so than in Africa. [Fragile government institutions](#), powerful [criminal](#) and [militant groups](#), [international power struggles](#), and competition over Africa's [natural resources](#) have nurtured an environment supportive of a growing

network of PMSCs. Across the continent, they are used to secure energy facilities, government buildings, and private infrastructure, protect local actors and foreign personnel, and provide police and military training, intelligence, and active fire support to governments and corporate clients.

Through entities like the colossal PMSC Wagner, Russia has found an unconventional and effective way to assert influence in Africa's security landscape. [In the Sahel region](#), Russian PMSCs have filled a void left by departing French military forces and capitalizing on [local anti-French sentiment](#) in recent years.

Amid shifting allegiances, Wagner underscores how Russia's indirect power projection allows the Kremlin to wield substantial influence without deploying conventional military forces. Wagner's activities are believed to span across [Mali](#), [Sudan](#), [Zimbabwe](#), [Angola](#), [Madagascar](#), [Guinea](#), [Guinea-Bissau](#), [Mozambique](#), [Burkina Faso](#), [Chad](#), the [Central African Republic](#) (CAR), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Other Russian PMSCs, [such as RSB Group](#), [Moran Security Group](#), and [Patriot](#), also operate across Africa.

At the center of Russia's PMSC network in Africa stands Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner's financier. The Russian tycoon [celebrated the success](#) of the coup in Niger and declared Wagner capable of handling the situation, though the Russian government declined to support it. Despite Prigozhin's longstanding quarrels with the Russian military, which culminated in his insurrectionist march toward Moscow [in June](#), Prigozhin was recently seen meeting with [African dignitaries on the side](#) of the Russia-Africa summit in St Petersburg.

As the Nigerien government grapples with its situation, Wagner could again act as a Kremlin surrogate, safeguarding [Russia's interests](#) by filling the security vacuum left by the ousted French military. Already, there are fears that Niger may halt uranium exports, vital to both [French and EU supplies](#), and forcing the West's attention to the country. Russian media has [criticized Prigozhin](#) since his rebellion and officials have downplayed state connections to [Wagner's activities in Africa](#). But Prigozhin's ongoing role in Africa suggests the Kremlin is relying on smoke and mirrors to obscure its true motivations.

Beyond Russia, numerous Western PMSCs have embedded themselves within Africa's security. Unlike Russia's PMSCs, most do not operate on the frontlines of

conflict and primarily operate in security and training roles, though do coordinate with official military deployments. French PMSC Secopex [made headlines in 2011](#) when its founder was killed in Libya during the country's revolution, and it remains unclear as to what the PMSC's role was.

Secopex had also been involved in the [CAR and Somalia](#), while Corpguard (also created by the co-founder of Secopex, David Hornus) [has been involved in training the Cote D'Ivoire's military](#).

Other French PMSCs, such as Agemira, are active in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Though French-owned, Agemira [is registered in Bulgaria](#) to take advantage of the country's lack of regulation and transparency. The UK's Aegis Defence Services is believed to have worked [in 18 African countries](#), while [G4S, Erinys, and Olive Group](#) are also active in Africa.

U.S. PMSCs have been active across the continent since the 2000s, with [MPRI, CACI International, and Academi \(previously the notorious Blackwater\)](#) among the most notable. Others, such as DynCorp, have provided training and logistical support to [Liberia, Sudan, and Somalia](#), while Triple Canopy has been active [in Niger](#). AdvanFort Co in turn offers anti-[piracy maritime protection](#) in East and West Africa. Germany's Xeless and Asgaard are also active in Africa, with the latter having operations in [Sudan, Libya, Mauritania, and Egypt](#).

PMSCs have increasingly begun to operate in the same conflict zones. Somalia, [which lacked a functional state](#) for more than two decades, [provided fertile ground for PMSC expansion](#). PMSCs from the [U.S., UK, China, UAE](#), and even [Norway](#) have helped Somalia train its official government forces and provide maritime protection from piracy and terrorism and ensure stability. But in Libya, PMSCs from or backed by [Russia](#), France, [the UK](#), the [U.S.](#), [Turkey](#), the [United Arab Emirates](#) (UAE), and more have all been sent to the country since 2011 to exploit the chaos and advance their interests.

Active in Libya, Turkey's SADAT group has also signed deals to [train African troops](#) while pitching itself as a Muslim alternative PMSC [for Islamic-majority countries](#). The UAE-based Black Shield Security Company was accused [in 2020](#) of promising Sudanese citizens security contractor jobs but instead sent them to conflict zones in Libya. Other UAE PMSCs have been active [in East Africa](#), including in Somalia, while China has [developed a multitude of PMSCs](#) to secure

its Belt and Road projects in Africa. [Israeli PMSCs](#) have their own African operations.

[In 2014](#), the Nigerian government began hiring PMSCs to help defeat the Boko Haram insurgency. One of them, Specialized Task, Training, Equipment, and Protection (STTEP), was also set by EO's Barlow and saw significant success that helped grant it additional contracts. Other modern South African PMSCs include [Osprey, Blackhawk](#), and Dyck Advisory Group, the latter of which was hired by Mozambique to combat Al-Shabaab militants but was accused of killing civilians indiscriminately by the UN [in 2020](#).

The use of PMSCs in Africa is likely to expand. They often offer African governments a quick, relatively inexpensive, and tailored way to manage crises instead of relying on ineffective state forces. PMSCs also enable international companies to protect themselves without relying on the fanfare of official military deployments by working with another corporate entity.

Nonetheless, this raises questions about sovereignty, a recurring issue in a continent where it has consistently been violated since African countries won their independence. The monopoly on the use of violent force by their police and military institutions has been steadily eroded by criminals, militants, foreign countries, and increasingly, PMSCs.

The dangers of commodifying security are evident. Foreign companies and powerful local actors can afford security, while the core issues of instability in countries or regions are not addressed. Furthermore, instability is often used by outside forces to their advantage. Many Africans also end up working for PMSCs [outside the continent](#) because they are cheaper than recruits from other parts of the world.

Furthermore, PMSCs, and the governments and companies that employ them, remain largely uncommitted to stronger regulation. The [Montreux Document](#) aimed to enforce greater rules for PMSCs, but has been criticized for its limited scope and lack of binding nature. Other countries, [including the five members](#) of the UN Security Council, have refused to ratify the UN International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing, and Training of Mercenaries.

Criticism of PMSCs in Africa is growing. [In February 2023](#), the African Union (AU) commissioner for political affairs, peace, and security, Bankole Adeoye,

called for the “complete exclusion of mercenaries from the African continent.” But U.S. PMSC Bancroft Global [had already been hired](#) by the AU to assess the risk of Somali forces trained by Blackwater founder Erik Prince to continue operating in the country.

These entities epitomize globalization. Aegis Defence Services [was acquired](#) by Canadian company GardaWorld in 2015, while DynCorp was bought by Amentum [in 2020](#). Academi and Triple Canopy [merged in 2014](#) to form Constellis Group, while Triple Canopy has [outsourced work](#) to Peru-based PMSC Defion International. Erik Prince, through the Hong Kong-based [Frontier Services Group](#), has helped China train its own PMSCs for use in Africa and elsewhere. G4S was meanwhile bought by Allied Universal [in 2021](#) and is [now North America’s third-largest private employer](#). Allied Universal itself is [owned by](#) institutional investor Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec and private equity firm Warburg Pincus.

Many PMSCs provide legitimate and needed security for civilians and government officials. But considering the wide-ranging motivations, means, and methods of so many PMSCs on the continent—and increasingly in the same spaces—it is critical for Africa’s governments, leaders, and populations to consider how comfortable they are in allowing this rapidly developing global PMSC network to continue expanding in their own backyards.

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How The US Supreme Court Became An Arm Of The Republican Party



Professor Khiara M. Bridges worked with students from the Reproductive Rights and Justice seminar she taught last semester on an amicus brief for an abortion rights case the U.S. Supreme Court will hear in March. Photo: law.berkeley.edu

The court is making decisions based on the GOP platform, not the Constitution, says legal scholar Khiara M. Bridges

The U.S. Supreme Court, whose current ideological leanings are extremely reactionary, has spearheaded a broad national regression on human rights. Indeed, the United States is a global outlier on multiple fronts (the only wealthy nation without a universal health care system and number one in firearms per capita, to name just a few), and some of the latest Supreme Court rulings (on abortion, guns and affirmative action) are turning the country into “[a global pariah](#).”

How do we make sense of these utterly dangerous developments? First of all, why is the Supreme Court acting like the executive committee of the Republican Party? Are there even clean legal arguments upon which its rulings are based? In

this exclusive interview for *Truthout*, renowned law professor and anthropologist Khiara M. Bridges, who specializes in the intersection of race, class, reproductive justice and law, shares her insights into the issues raised above and offers some legal remedies that she believes will help achieve racial justice and equality in the 21st century.

Bridges is a professor of law at UC Berkeley School of Law. Her scholarship has appeared in scores of prestigious publications, including the *Harvard Law Review*, the *Stanford Law Review*, the *California Law Review*, the *NYU Law Review* and the *Virginia Law Review*. She is the author of *Reproducing Race: An Ethnography of Pregnancy as a Site of Racialization* (2011), *The Poverty of Privacy Rights* (2017) and *Critical Race Theory: A Primer* (2019). On July 12, 2022, Bridges testified before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee about the fallout from the U.S. Supreme Court's recent decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which overturned *Roe v. Wade*.

C. J. Polychroniou: Race, class and gender have functioned as organizing principles in the development of U.S. society and culture from the very beginning and continue to shape social identities to this day. Your own work, as a professor of law and an anthropologist, focuses on the relationship between race, class and gender in the context of reproductive rights and law. Can you briefly discuss this relationship and explain what intersectionality has to do with efforts to create a more equitable and just world for ourselves and future generations?

Khiara M. Bridges: I will try to answer your question by explaining why I was drawn to the study of the intersection of race, class and gender in the context of reproductive rights and law.

When I was in law school, I was struck by the way pregnancy and motherhood were described in Supreme Court cases. On the whole, the court talked about pregnancy and motherhood in celebratory terms. They were conceptualized as good for the pregnant woman, her family, her community and the nation as a whole. Language idealizing pregnancy and motherhood could be found even in cases in which the court protected the right to terminate a pregnancy. For example, in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, in which the court affirmed its holding in *Roe v. Wade* that the Constitution protected the right to terminate a pre-viability pregnancy, the court writes:

'As with abortion, reasonable people will have differences of opinion about these matters. One view is based on such reverence for the wonder of creation that any

pregnancy ought to be welcomed and carried to full term no matter how difficult it will be to provide for the child and ensure its well-being. Another is that the inability to provide for the nurture and care of the infant is a cruelty to the child and an anguish to the parent.'

Here, even in its defense of the constitutional right to abortion, the court speaks about pregnancy and motherhood in radiant terms. In this framing, the abortion right deserves recognition and protection because when pregnancy occurs during a disadvantageous time in a person's life — when they do not have the means to provide for the child's emotional and material needs — it is "cruel" to the infant and causes the parent "anguish." In my reading, the court still conceptualizes pregnancy as a blessing. The court recognizes a constitutional right to abortion simply because this blessing may occur at a bad time.

The fairly laudatory presentation of pregnancy and motherhood in the court's jurisprudence sits in diametrical opposition to the way that *some* people's pregnancies are spoken about in political discourse. When I was in law school, the nation had just spent the two immediately preceding decades talking about "welfare queens" — implicitly Black women who were imagined to have babies solely to increase the size of their welfare checks. "Welfare queens" were decidedly *bad* for the nation; they drained public finances while producing children that were the country's future criminals and "welfare queens" themselves. I was in law school during a period of time in which politicians were arguing that welfare beneficiaries should be required to take long-acting reversible contraception, or to undergo sterilization, in order to receive financial assistance from the state. Essentially, politicians were talking about poor people's reproduction as if it were a social *problem* that needed to be solved. This was, again, the complete inverse of the way that the court spoke about pregnancy and motherhood.

I was fascinated by the inversion. And race and class explain the opposition. They explain why some people's procreation is celebrated, and other people's procreation is denigrated. And that's really the lesson of intersectionality. Intersectionality offers a framework for understanding the complexity of social life. It recognizes that power is exerted along many different axes in the U.S. — race, class, sex, gender identity, sexuality, ability, immigration status, religion etc. And intersectionality simply submits that privilege or subjugation will look different at the various intersections of those axes of power. So, for example,

sexism when it intersects with race privilege will look different than the way it looks when it intersects with race un-privilege. The form that sexism, patriarchy and misogyny have taken for affluent white women is the command to reproduce at all costs. The form that sexism has taken for Black women, especially when they are poor, is the demand that they avoid reproduction at all costs.

And so, intersectionality cautions that as we engage in efforts to create a more equitable and just world, we have to be careful not to allow one group's experiences with an axis of power to stand in for everyone's experience with that axis of power. If we do, our efforts will be liberatory only for some.

Critical race theory was developed in the 1980s but has become a hot-button political issue for today's conservatives in the U.S. What is it about critical race theory that has become such an obsession for Republicans, and why is it coming up now?

You are absolutely correct to note that critical race theory was developed in the 1980s. It was created by law professors who were trying to figure out how it came to be that dramatic racial inequality endured even though the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s had forced the nation to bestow formal racial equality onto people of color. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 both had been passed. These were monumental pieces of legislation. Nevertheless, when these incipient critical race theorists looked around at the social landscape in the 1980s, they saw that people of color were still at the bottom of most measures of social well-being. Black people, particularly, were incarcerated at higher rates than white people; they were poorer than white people; they were sicker than white people; they died earlier than white people. So, the law professors who created critical race theory wanted to think about how this dramatic racial inequality could coexist with formal racial equality. That is what critical race theory sets out to do. It is an advanced legal theory that attempts to think through the relationship between law and continuing racial injustice in a post-civil rights era.

Of course, this is not what the Republican Party is talking about when they invoke "critical race theory." Conservative pundits and politicians say that critical race theory is being taught in K-12 schools. They say that it is "Marxist." They say that it proposes that all white people are racist and all Black people are oppressed. Essentially, their description of critical race theory bears absolutely no

relationship to *actual* critical race theory — the advanced legal theory that law professors began developing in the 1980s. Essentially, the Republican Party has co-opted the term, and they are using the struggle to rid so-called critical race theory from public life to accomplish the goal of silencing any talk that suggests that racial inequality remains a problem and that race still matters in the U.S. today.

I think that it is important to keep in mind precisely when the Republican Party began talking about critical race theory. The GOP's fixation began in fall 2020 — right after the country had a long, hot summer of racial protests in the wake of George Floyd's murder. If you recall, optimists that summer were saying that the country was having a "racial reckoning." Then, in the fall, the Republican Party began claiming that critical race theory was being taught *everywhere* — to federal employees, kindergartners and everyone in between. The timing is no accident. It seems pretty obvious that the Republican Party created a bogeyman out of critical race theory to stop whatever racial reckoning that was happening at the time and to undo any gains — legislative, political, discursive — that racial justice advocates had managed to achieve that summer.

Finally, it is important to understand the *intentionality* behind the creation of "critical race theory" as a bogeyman. Most scholars thinking through the Republican Party's co-optation of the term "critical race theory" credit Christopher Rufo, a conservative activist, with putting so-called critical race theory on the Republican Party's radar. In March 2021, [Rufo tweeted](#):

'We have successfully frozen their brand — "critical race theory" — into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category.

The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think "critical race theory." We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.'

Very rarely do the villains explicitly and publicly reveal their nefarious plans. In this case, the villain did just that.

The Supreme Court's Republican-appointed majority has issued a series of ultra-

reactionary rulings on a number of critical issues such as voting rights, affirmative action, gerrymandering, abortion, gun control and campaign finance. Are these rulings based on clear legal arguments, or are they in fact driven by political preferences and ideological biases? For example, there seems to be very little consistency in the Supreme Court decisions on guns and abortion.

I think that it is hard for anyone to say with a straight face that the court's recent decisions are based on clear, consistent legal principles. I believe that anyone paying attention sees that the court has been issuing decisions that are consistent only in the sense that they consistently align with the Republican Party's political platform.

First, we have to keep in mind that the court creates its own docket; it decides which cases it wants to hear. So, it is not just some odd coincidence that in the last two terms alone, the court has decided to hear cases that touch on the most hot-button political issues of our time: abortion, gun rights, voting rights, affirmative action, LGBTQ rights, the free exercise of religion etc. The court has *chosen* to hear these particular cases because with six conservative justices presently sitting on the bench, it has the power to organize American society in the way that the Republican Party wants.

Second, it really is impossible to reconcile the court's decisions with one another. A search for a legal principle that unites the cases will turn up nothing. For example, in last year's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, in which the court overturned *Roe v. Wade* and permitted states to criminalize abortion, the court argued that in order to determine what any given provision of the Constitution does and does not protect, we have to look to what people were thinking at the time of that provision's ratification. This, the court said, is what originalism requires. The court said that when we are trying to figure out whether the Due Process Clause contained in the 14th Amendment protects the abortion right, originalism demands that we divine whether people in 1868, the year that the 14th Amendment was ratified, thought that the Due Process Clause protected abortion rights. The court in *Dobbs* looks at all the criminal abortion laws on the books in 1868 and answers in the negative: In 1868, people did not think that the 14th Amendment protected abortion rights. The fact that women were unable to vote until 1920 and, therefore, had no say in *any* of the laws on the books in 1868 is irrelevant to the court's analysis.

Fast forward to *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* [*SFFA*], which was decided earlier this summer. There, the court held that the race-based affirmative action programs instituted at Harvard College and University of North Carolina violated the Equal Protection Clause contained in the 14th Amendment. Now, just last year in *Dobbs*, the court declared that originalism is the proper method for interpreting the Constitution. This would suggest that the court in *SFFA* would try to figure out whether people in 1868 thought that the 14th Amendment permitted race-conscious efforts to produce racial equality. Note that in 1868, the nation was just three years past the end of the Civil War, which was fought, in part, to end the institution of chattel slavery in this country. The 14th Amendment was added to the Constitution for the express purpose of making formerly enslaved people equal citizens of the nation. A court that believes that originalism is an inexorable command would have interrogated whether in 1868, people believed that this amendment that had just been ratified with the express purpose of making Black people equal citizens permitted race-conscious efforts to produce racial equality. The answer, clearly, is yes. Originalism leads to the conclusion that race-based affirmative action is constitutional. Perhaps that explains why the court says *nothing* about originalism in *SFFA*. Indeed, the majority opinion in that case is perfectly originalism-free. No legal principle explains why originalism is relevant when the court is deciding whether a constitutional right to abortion exists and irrelevant when the court is deciding whether race-based affirmative action is permissible. It is results-oriented reasoning all the way down.

I should mention that in *SFFA*, Justice Thomas authored a concurring opinion that endeavors to provide an originalist defense of the court's holding that race-based affirmative action is unconstitutional. The opinion is entirely unconvincing. Historians will shudder when reading it. Perhaps that explains why no other justice, including his conservative colleagues who preached the gospel of originalism in *Dobbs*, signed on to it.

Why is the U.S. obsessed with abortion, and what does the overturning of Roe v. Wade say about U.S. credibility with regard to human rights?

The nation's current obsession with abortion makes it hard to believe that abortion has not always been a partisan issue. Indeed, as recently as the mid-1980s, abortion was not very politically charged. Only in the last 40 years or so has the Republican Party built its platform around the criminalization of abortion and the Democratic Party offered itself as the party that favors abortion

rights and access.

The reversal of *Roe v. Wade* positions the U.S. as an outlier on the world stage. Most countries are liberalizing their criminal abortion laws. Five years ago, Ireland, a deeply Catholic country, voted to repeal its abortion ban. In 2020, Argentina changed its laws to permit legal abortion up until the 14th week of pregnancy. And in 2021, the Supreme Court in Mexico ruled that the country's constitution prohibited the criminalization of abortion. So, we are witnessing the expansion of abortion rights in countries across the globe. These countries are changing their laws to allow their citizens access to safe and legal abortion because they recognize that the ability to terminate a pregnancy safely and legally is necessary if people are to control the content and trajectory of their lives. These countries have come to the realization that governments that force their citizens to continue pregnancies and to give birth against their will deny their citizens' dignity and treat them inhumanely.

The reversal of *Roe*, then, reveals the U.S. to be deeply regressive on this issue, and devastatingly so.

One final question: What legal remedies would you recommend to achieve racial justice and equality in the 21st century?

Perhaps it's because I am a constitutional law scholar that when I think of legal remedies, I think of Supreme Court cases that should be reversed. The court has handed down some truly terrible decisions. These are decisions that, if they had come out the other way, would have helped to make the nation more racially just. There are too many cases to name here. But one decision that I repeatedly come back to is *Washington v. Davis*, which was decided in 1976. The case concerned a standardized test that the District of Columbia had been using to make hiring decisions for the district's police force. Black applicants did not perform as well on the test. As a result, very few Black people were getting hired as police officers. A Black applicant challenged the District of Columbia's use of the test, arguing that because the test disproportionately burdened Black people, and because it did not do a particularly good job of identifying which candidates would be competent, effective police officers, the government's use of the test violated the Equal Protection Clause. In the course of upholding the constitutionality of the test, the court announced the rule that a law will be struck down as a violation of the Equal Protection Clause only if there is a finding that

lawmakers had the *intent* to discriminate against a racial group when passing the law.

A different outcome in *Washington v. Davis* would have allowed the court to strike down laws that do not mention race explicitly, but nevertheless have the effect of burdening people of color. Note that this is exactly how critical scholars define institutional or structural racism: We understand institutional/structural racism to be what happens when institutions and structures operate in a race-neutral manner that nevertheless perpetuates historical racial disadvantage and produces new forms of racial disenfranchisement. Essentially, a different outcome in *Washington v. Davis* would have allowed the federal judiciary to address structural racism. It would have upheld race-neutral laws that are racially burdensome only if the government could show that there is no other way to accomplish the goal that it set out to accomplish with the law. So, for example, in *Washington v. Davis*, the District of Columbia would have been able to use the test that worked to disproportionately prevent Black people from being hired onto the police force only if it showed that this particular test was the *only* way to identify people who would be effective police officers. Few laws would survive such a standard. Accordingly, the federal judiciary would have been able to diminish structural racism — perhaps even significantly.

So: What legal remedies would I recommend to achieve racial justice and equality in the 21st century? I would begin by reversing *Washington v. Davis*.

I will end just by noting that *Washington v. Davis* was decided close to 50 years ago. I think a lot of people believe that the Supreme Court has only recently become anti-democratic, obviously partisan, uninterested in human rights etc. But nothing could be further from the truth. The court's recent decisions are part of a *longue durée* in which the court has demonstrated a patent hostility to racial justice and equality.

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What's Happening In Niger Is Far From A Typical Coup



Vijay Prashad

On July 26, 2023, Niger's presidential guard moved against the sitting president—Mohamed Bazoum—and [conducted](#) a coup d'état. A brief contest among the various armed forces in the country ended with all the branches agreeing to the removal of Bazoum and the creation of a military junta led by Presidential Guard Commander General Abdourahamane "Omar" Tchiani. This is the fourth country in the Sahel region of Africa to have experienced a coup—the other three being Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali. The new government [announced](#) that it would stop allowing France to leech Niger's uranium (one in three lightbulbs in France is powered by the uranium from the field in Arlit,

northern Niger). Tchiani's government [revoked](#) all military cooperation with France, which means that the 1,500 French troops will need to start packing their bags (as they did in both Burkina Faso and Mali). Meanwhile, there has been no public statement about Airbase 201, the U.S. facility in Agadez, a thousand kilometers from the country's capital of Niamey. This is the [largest drone base](#) in the world and key to U.S. operations across the Sahel. U.S. troops have been told to remain on the base for now and drone flights have been suspended. The coup is certainly against the French presence in Niger, but this anti-French sentiment has not enveloped the U.S. military footprint in the country.

Interventions

Hours after the coup was stabilized, the main Western states—especially France and the United States—[condemned](#) the coup and asked for the reinstatement of Bazoum, who was immediately detained by the new government. But neither France nor the United States appeared to want to lead the response to the coup. Earlier this year, the French and U.S. governments worried about an insurgency in northern Mozambique that impacted the assets of the Total-Exxon natural gas field off the coastline of Cabo Delgado. Rather than send in French and U.S. troops, which would have polarized the population and increased anti-Western sentiment, the French and the United States made a [deal](#) for Rwanda to send its troops into Mozambique. Rwandan troops entered the northern province of Mozambique and shut down the insurgency. Both Western powers seem to favor a “Rwanda” type solution to the coup in Niger, but rather than have Rwanda enter Niger the hope was for ECOWAS—the Economic Community of West African States—to send in its force to restore Bazoum.

A day after the coup, ECOWAS [condemned](#) the coup. ECOWAS encompasses fifteen West African states, which in the past few years has suspended Burkina Faso and Mali from their ranks because of the coups in that country; Niger was also suspended from ECOWAS a few days after the coup. Formed in 1975 as an economic bloc, the grouping decided—despite no mandate in its original [mission](#)—to send in peacekeeping forces in 1990 into the heart of the Liberian Civil War. Since then, ECOWAS has sent its peacekeeping troops to several countries in the region, including Sierra Leone and Gambia. Not long after the coup in Niger, ECOWAS [placed](#) an embargo on the country that included suspending its right to basic commercial transactions with its neighbors, freezing Niger's central bank assets that are held in regional banks, and stopping foreign

aid (which comprises forty percent of Niger's budget). The most striking [statement](#) was that ECOWAS would take "all measures necessary to restore constitutional order." An August 6 deadline given by ECOWAS expired because the bloc could not agree to send troops across the border. ECOWAS asked for a "standby force" to be assembled and ready to invade Niger. Then, ECOWAS said it would meet on August 12 in Accra, Ghana, to go over its options. That meeting was [canceled](#) for "technical reasons." Mass demonstrations in key ECOWAS countries—such as [Nigeria](#) and [Senegal](#)—against an ECOWAS military invasion of Niger have confounded their own politicians to support an intervention. It would be naïve to suggest that no intervention is possible. Events are moving very fast, and there is no reason to suspect that ECOWAS will not intervene before August ends.

Coups in the Sahel

When ECOWAS suggested the possibility of an intervention into Niger, the military governments in Burkina Faso and Mali [said](#) that this would be a "declaration of war" not only against Niger but also against their countries. On August 2, one of the key leaders of the Niger coup, General Salifou Mody [traveled](#) to Bamako (Mali) and Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) to discuss the situation in the region and to coordinate their response to the possibility of an ECOWAS—or Western—military intervention into Niger. Ten days later, General Moussa Salaou Barmou [went](#) to Conakry (Guinea) to seek that country's support for Niger from the leader of the military government in that country, Mamadi Doumbouya. Suggestions have already been floated for Niger—one of the most important countries in the Sahel—to form part of the conversation of a federation that will include Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali. This would be a federation of countries that have had coups to overthrow what have been seen to be pro-Western governments that have not met the expectations of increasingly impoverished populations.

The story of the coup in Niger becomes partly the story of what the communist journalist Ruth First called "the contagion of the coup" in her remarkable book, *The Barrel of the Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d'états* (1970). Over the course of the past thirty years, politics in the Sahel countries has seriously desiccated. Parties with a history in the national liberation movements, even the socialist movements (such as Bazoum's party) have collapsed into being representatives of their elites, who are conduits of a Western agenda. The French-

U.S.-NATO war in Libya in 2011 allowed jihadis groups to pour out of Libya and flock into southern Algeria and into the Sahel (almost half of Mali is held by al-Qaeda-linked formations). The entry of these forces gave the local elites and the West the justification to further tighten limited trade union freedoms and to excise the left from the ranks of the established political parties. It is not as if the leaders of the mainline political parties are right-wing or center-right, but that whatever their orientation, they have no real independence from the will of Paris and Washington. They became—to use a word on the ground—“stooges” of the West.

Absent any reliable political instruments, the discarded rural and petty-bourgeois sections of the country turn to their children in the armed forces for leadership. People like Burkina Faso’s Captain Ibrahim Traoré (born 1988), who was raised in the rural province of Mouhoun, and Colonel Assimi Goïta (born 1988), who comes from the cattle market town and military redoubt of Kati, represent these broad class fractions perfectly. Their communities have been utterly left out of the hard austerity programs of the International Monetary Fund, of the theft of their resources by Western multinationals, and of the payments for Western military garrisons in the country. Discarded populations with no real political platform to speak for them, these communities have rallied behind their young men in the military. These are “Colonel’s Coups”—coups of ordinary people who have no other options—not “General’s Coups”—coups of the elites to stem the political advancement of the people. That is why the coup in Niger is being defended in mass rallies from Niamey to the small, remote towns that border Libya. When I traveled to these regions before the pandemic, it was clear that the anti-French sentiment found no channel of expression other than hope for a military coup that would bring in leaders such as Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso, who had been assassinated in 1987. Captain Traoré, in fact, sports a red beret like Sankara, speaks with Sankara’s left-wing frankness, and even mimics Sankara’s diction. It would be a mistake to see these men as from the left since they are moved by anger at the failure of the elites and of Western policy. They do not come to power with a well-worked out agenda built from left political traditions.

The Niger military leaders have formed a twenty-one-person cabinet headed by Ali Mahaman Lamine Zeine, a civilian who had been a finance minister in a previous government and worked at the African Development Bank in Chad. Military leaders are prominent in the cabinet. Whether the appointment of this

civilian-led cabinet will divide the ranks of ECOWAS is to be seen. Certainly, Western imperialist forces—notably the United States with troops on the ground in Niger—would not like to see this torque of coups remain in place. Europe—through French leadership—had shifted the borders of their continent from north of the Mediterranean Sea to south of the Sahara Desert, suborning the Sahel states into a project known as G-5 Sahel. Now with anti-French governments in three of these states (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) and with the possibility of trouble in the two remaining states (Chad and Mauritania), Europe will have to retreat to its coastline. Sanctions to deplete the mass support of the new governments will increase, and the possibility of military intervention will hang over the region like a famished vulture.

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