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The legitimization trap: substantive justice as decolonial praxis

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial states can organize dispossession through institutions that remain procedurally regular, legally authoritative, and indispensable to citizens' claims. This article theorizes the legitimization trap as a contingent configuration in which procedural propriety certifies a substantively unjust order and narrows the terms in which that order can be contested. The trap mediates property, extraction, and racialised accumulation; it does not replace them as causes of material injustice. Citizens may internalize deprivation as personal inadequacy, a pathway of self-colonisation, while alternatives include strategic or cynical compliance, withdrawal, and collective resistance. We develop substantive justice as a conflict-aware decolonial praxis grounded in redistribution, recognitive dignity, and ontological plurality, with procedure retained as a safeguard against arbitrariness. Illustrations from Nigeria, South Africa, and Bolivia expose the framework's conditions and tensions. The argument reconnects legitimacy to the contested question of whether people can flourish.

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Introduction

Elections, courts, waiting lists, audit systems, and constitutional rights matter because they restrain arbitrariness and give citizens recognizable grounds on which to make claims. The same institutions can organize a political paradox. In Nigeria, petroleum extraction proceeds through constitutional ownership and legally constituted state-corporate arrangements while wellhead communities bear its ecological costs. In South Africa, a constitutional right to housing becomes an intergenerational experience of registration and waiting. In Bolivia, plurinational recognition and the rights of Mother Earth coexist with extractivist development on Indigenous territories. Procedure offers a language of accountability in each setting, yet it can also certify the arrangements through which substantive injustice persists.

Scholarship on legitimacy gives procedure a more complex role than a simple appearance of legality. Legitimate power depends on conformity to rules, the justifiability of those rules in shared beliefs, and evidence of consent (Beetham, 1991). Research using African survey data likewise connects willingness to obey with governmental trustworthiness and procedural justice (Levi et al., 2009). Citizens also judge service delivery through expectations, perceived impartiality, distribution, attribution, and encounters with public authority, which makes the relationship between performance and legitimacy contingent rather than automatic (McLoughlin, 2015). These accounts establish the value of defensible procedures and explain important variation in legitimating belief.

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Our question begins where their principal measures often stop: how colonial property orders and administrative categories structure the institutions being evaluated, the claims citizens can make within them, and the injuries that become publicly intelligible.

That configuration is especially consequential in postcolonial states. Colonial projects joined rule-bound administration to dispossession and resource transfer (Chatterjee, 2004), while differentiated citizenship was institutionalized through colonial forms of rule (Mamdani, 1996). Political independence retained colonial political forms (Getachew, 2019). Racialised accumulation continued to structure the global economy (Bhattacharyya, 2018), and racial capitalism shaped unequal control over land and resources (Robinson, 2000). Procedure does not create this material order by itself. Property regimes, state-capital relations, coercion, and global markets do that work. Procedure can make the order administrable and publicly justifiable, defining which harms count, who possesses standing, and how long a claimant must wait.

This article asks under what conditions procedural propriety becomes a legitimization trap that stabilizes substantive injustice, and how citizens variously inhabit, navigate, or contest it. We define the legitimization trap as a contingent institutional configuration in which procedurally valid decisions certify a substantively unjust order and narrow the grammars through which that order can be challenged. The target of the critique is procedural sufficiency, the closure of substantive judgment once authorized steps have been completed. Rule-bound decision-making, public reasons, appeal, and meaningful participation remain indispensable protections. Yet, their presence cannot by itself settle whether a political order is just.

Rawls's justice as fairness clarifies why procedure cannot be treated as an empty shell. His original position is a justificatory procedure for choosing principles that protect equal basic liberties and regulate the distribution of social and economic advantage (Rawls, 1999). We therefore do not treat Rawls as an advocate of administrative completion or make liberal proceduralism the problem in itself. Our concern is the narrower institutional move through which completed authorized steps are allowed to settle the justice of the substantive order they administer.

The distinction between procedural certification and citizen belief is central. A state can present an arrangement as legitimate without persuading everyone it governs. Citizens can remain dependent on its procedures while distrusting officials, blaming the state, improvising outside formal channels, or mobilizing against it. Under more restricted conditions, procedural encounters can redirect political injury toward self-evaluation. Self-colonisation is the affective and practical uptake of an inherited administrative order through which a claimant learns to experience exclusion as insufficient merit, patience, documentation, or procedural competence. Self-colonisation is one trajectory among strategic or cynical compliance, withdrawal or quiet encroachment (Bayat, 2010), and structural critique or collective resistance. The legitimization trap can therefore persist without generalized acquiescence.

This conditional account draws on Fanon's (1952/1986, 1961/2004) analyses of the psychic life of colonial hierarchy while retaining his historical and political-economic focus. Fanon's warning that national bourgeoisies could reproduce colonial relations after independence connects institutional inheritance to subject formation. The concept of self-colonisation extends that insight to encounters in which formally independent states distribute recognition and material access through categories inherited from, or patterned by, colonial administration. It does not claim that postcolonial citizens share one psychology, nor that internalization displaces hegemony, governmentality, system justification, or coercion as alternative explanations.

The article develops substantive justice as the critical and practical orientation through which the trap can be exposed. Substantive justice asks whether institutions expand capabilities (Sen,

1999, 2009), sustain participatory parity (Fraser, 1997, 2009), and admit plural ways of knowing (Santos, 2014) and being (Escobar, 2020) into collective judgment. Nyerere's Ujamaa joins collective self-reliance (Nyerere, 1968) with a contested relation between communal aspiration and state authority (Fouéré, 2014). Reparative justice makes material repair central (Táíwò, 2022), and anticolonial self-determination makes world-making central to political freedom (Getachew, 2019). Flourishing remains politically contested. Substantive justice therefore requires procedures that give affected people standing, constrain arbitrary power, make trade-offs visible, and keep outcomes open to revision. Neither Western nor Indigenous provenance guarantees an egalitarian result.

Our contribution is threefold. First, the legitimization trap connects scholarship on state legitimacy and procedure with colonial political economy and postcolonial subject formation. It distinguishes the substantive order that produces dispossession, the procedures that authorize and organize it, and the variable responses of those who live within it. Second, self-colonisation becomes a bounded proposition about when institutional encounters redirect structural injury toward self-evaluation, with explicit diagnostics that distinguish it from dependence, cynicism, and resistance. Third, substantive justice brings redistribution, recognitive parity, and ontological plurality into a conflict-aware framework in which procedures are judged by their protections and consequences. Illustrations from Nigeria, South Africa, and Bolivia complicate these claims rather than confirm a uniform mechanism. Nigeria foregrounds property and extraction, South Africa reveals the mixed politics of bureaucratic waiting, and Bolivia exposes tensions among ontological recognition, redistribution, and Indigenous self-determination. The analysis first reconstructs the value and limits of procedural legitimacy, then specifies the trap and its subjective trajectories, develops substantive justice, and revisits the framework through the three illustrations.

Legitimacy, procedure, and the colonial order

What procedure can secure

Procedure has a genuine political achievement: it separates the exercise of authority from the immediate will of the powerful. Rules, hearings, reasons, records, and avenues of appeal can make decisions predictable and contestable. Thompson's (1975) history of the Black Act shows why legal form cannot be reduced to elite ideology. The rule of law created constraints and a terrain of struggle even within a property order fashioned by class power. Abandoning these protections exposes the vulnerable to arbitrariness, discretionary violence, and majoritarian domination.

Luhmann (1969) offers the strongest account of procedure's legitimating capacity. Participation in an authorized process can make a binding decision acceptable even when participants dislike the outcome. A procedure structures expectations, allocates roles, and closes a dispute so that collective action can continue. This account explains why the legitimacy of a decision cannot depend on universal agreement. It also identifies the point from which our argument begins. Procedural closure settles what an institution will do; it does not settle whether the property relations, distributional effects, or inherited categories administered through that decision are just.

Beetham's (1991) account makes the same distinction visible from another direction. Rule conformity supplies one dimension of legitimacy, while justifiable rules and expressed consent supply others. Coloniality enters at the level of justifiability. Rules can be internally coherent and publicly administered while encoding a history of conquest, racialised ownership, or differentiated standing. Unacknowledged historical injustice can itself corrode the legitimacy of the institutions charged

with remedying disadvantage (Iverson, 2000). Consent also becomes ambiguous when access to housing, welfare, land, or legal recognition depends on participation in the only authorized channel. Compliance can record dependence, strategic navigation, or the absence of a viable alternative alongside, or in place of, normative endorsement.

From formal rationality to procedural closure

Weber distinguishes formal rationality, which evaluates calculability, consistency, and general rules, from substantive rationality, which evaluates action through values and effects (Weber, 1978). Kalberg (1980) shows how this distinction clarifies the detachment of rule-bound authority from the ends it was meant to serve. Hegel's ethical state had made the realization of concrete freedom the institutional aspiration of political life (Hegel, 1820/1991). Marx (1843/1970) exposed how abstract political equality could coexist with material inequality. Read together, these arguments identify a durable tension between the authorized form of public power and the freedom that gives that form a purpose.

The legitimization trap names a particular resolution of this tension. Under the legitimization trap, formal completion is treated as closing substantive judgment. Elections, consultations, court rulings, audits, and allocation formulae then become evidence that justice has been done because authorized steps occurred. This claim is narrower than a general critique of bureaucracy. Documents and records constitute bureaucratic knowledge, subjects, and outcomes by making some claims visible and others difficult to register (Hull, 2012). Audit systems can extend accountability while generating rituals of verification that privilege measurable compliance over social effects (Power, 1997). In rural India, welfare-oriented bureaucracies produce arbitrary and uneven care through files, reporting practices, and ordinary administration, joining benevolent programmes to structural violence (Gupta, 2012). These processes show how procedure can mediate harm. They do not establish that citizens believe the harm is deserved. Bauman's (1989) analysis of bureaucratic rationality and divided responsibility shows how technically orderly action can become morally distant from its consequences. Graeber (2015) likewise connects the impersonal appearance of rules to the structural violence that makes bureaucratic commands effective and to the interpenetration of public and private administration. These critiques widen the problem beyond state paperwork while reinforcing the need to distinguish orderly procedure from justified consequence. Scholarship on institutional racism extends the point to the present: rules, discourses, and procedures can sustain an appearance of equality and justice while maintaining institutional inequality as the norm (Ahmed, 2024).

Colonial administration and substantive order

The postcolonial state gives procedural closure a specific history. Colonial administrations used law, enumeration, indirect rule, and bureaucratic classification to extract resources and distribute political standing unequally (Mamdani, 1996). Colonialism operated as a structural injustice because legal and normative systems enabled, legitimized, and normalized dispossession (Lu, 2011). Law remains embedded in the arrangements that carry colonial injustice into the present (Balint et al., 2020). Their institutional inheritance shapes state legitimacy and development after independence (Englebert, 2000), although African bureaucracies cannot be understood as deficient copies of an idealized Weberian form. Everyday public services operate through interface

officials, practical norms, and negotiated encounters that vary across agencies, classes, and national histories (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 2014).

This administrative inheritance remains embedded in a substantive political economy. Racial capitalism developed through colonial hierarchy (Robinson, 2000), while legal and bureaucratic forms helped organize racialised extraction (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Debt, international finance, and development administration connect that inheritance to the contemporary world economy. Property, corporate power, and the global division of labour shape who controls value and who bears harm. Administrative and legal procedures authorize transfers, classify their effects, and determine the claims through which redress can be sought. Colonial conservation converted communal tenure into state or private property (Domínguez & Luoma, 2020). Postcolonial environmental governance has often extended the resulting mechanisms of control over land, resources, and resource-dependent communities (Randeria, 2007).

The framework therefore theorizes the national institutional mediation of global processes. Commodity markets, corporate ownership, finance, and development standards enter concessions, budgets, audits, eligibility categories, and legal claims. States translate transnational power into administratively operable decisions, while national procedures can make global accumulation appear authorized and impersonal.

Decolonial analysis makes the relation legible. Modernity's universal reason developed through colonial domination (Mignolo, 2011). Its categories still determine which knowledge enters governance as authoritative (Santos, 2014). Demands for epistemic freedom expose boundaries around knowing subjects and worlds (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The legitimization trap brings this epistemic critique into dialogue with legitimacy and political economy. It arises when procedurally valid administration of a substantively unequal order is allowed to exhaust the question of justice. Its institutional force can persist amid disbelief and resistance because people still need documents, judgments, allocations, and official recognition to pursue their claims.

The legitimization trap and its subjective trajectories

A multi-level mechanism

Five analytical levels organize our framework: material order, procedural certification, institutional encounter, subjective trajectory, and normative and political interruption. Notably, the first four span material, institutional, and subjective domains; the fifth can alter each. Separating the levels prevents evidence at one from being used as proof of another. For instance, a lawful oil regime can be represented institutionally as proper without persuading an affected community that its poverty is deserved.

The trap forms when procedural certification produces closure around a substantively unjust order. Closure has two components. Authoritative closure occurs when completed procedure is treated as sufficient reason to accept a decision. Categorical closure occurs when administrative classifications define the injury as an eligibility problem, a budgetary delay, an externality, or an individual case, making its structural causes harder to express within the institution. Neither form erases grievance; they alter the costs and available languages of pursuing it. Legal authorization alone is therefore insufficient to demonstrate the trap. The observable threshold is a justificatory claim or institutional practice that treats procedural regularity as completing the question of justice or forces an injury into categories that exclude its structural terms.

Our framework's distinct increment lies in this conjunction. It connects a colonial and racialised material order to procedural closure and shows how closure restricts the institutional intelligibility of structural injury without requiring citizen endorsement. Adjacent approaches illuminate parts of this sequence; the legitimization trap specifies their institutional relation and observable threshold.

Four conditions make such closure more likely. First, an authorized institution must exercise decisive or practically indispensable control over a remedy, resource, or public recognition. Second, causal chains from decision to harm must be distributed across agencies, corporations, or scales so that responsibility can fragment (Bauman, 1989). Third, auditable proxies for performance must be available to stand in for substantive effects (Power, 1997). Fourth, routes for reopening a decision must be weak, costly, or indefinitely deferred. These are conditions of institutional closure, distinct from the conditions of citizen uptake. The trap can operate amid disbelief and resistance and does not require self-colonisation. Self-colonisation is a downstream, conditional diagnostic of one possible response.

Applicants may need to present themselves as patient beneficiaries, property disputes may need to accept the state's ownership categories, and Indigenous claims may need to become culturally recognizable within institutions whose developmental commitments remain unchanged. Procedural encounters can therefore transmit substantive norms of property, merit, and deservingness, and claimants may internalize those norms directly. The trap concerns the institutional force procedure gives them, rather than treating procedure as an alternative to substantive ideology.

Separating certification from causation in this way extends structural-violence analysis. Galtung (1969) locates avoidable harm in social arrangements; Farmer (2004) connects it to historically formed political economy. The legitimization trap identifies how procedures certify those arrangements, classify their consequences, and channel demands for repair. It also rejects any inference that legitimization necessarily makes violence invisible. People can see the harm clearly while remaining compelled to seek recognition through the institutions that administer it.

Table 1 separates the framework's analytical moments so that material causation, institutional legitimization, and subjective response are not collapsed. Figure 1 represents the mechanism. Material and political orders enter procedural institutions, which certify decisions and structure institutional legibility. Citizen responses then branch. Self-colonising uptake can feed legitimacy back into the procedure. Strategic compliance and cynicism reproduce institutional dependence without normative endorsement. Withdrawal and improvised provision can reduce direct reliance

Table 1. Analytical levels in the legitimization trap.

Level	Primary object	Guiding question	Indicative evidence
Material order	Property regimes, extraction, coercion, and racialised accumulation	What produces and distributes the harm?	Ownership, revenue flows, ecological burdens, dispossession
Procedural certification	Law, budgets, audits, classifications, elections, and review	How is the order rendered regular, impersonal, or proper?	Rules, files, reasons, performance measures, completed procedures
Institutional encounter	Eligibility assessment, documentation, waiting, adjudication, and service access	How is a structural claim translated and experienced?	Encounter records, claimant narratives, delay, humiliation, remedy
Subjective trajectory	Self-blame, strategic or cynical compliance, withdrawal, and structural critique or resistance	How do people interpret and act upon the encounter?	Attribution, affect, practical action, collective organization
Normative and political interruption	Redistribution, recognition, ontological plurality, and contestable safeguards	Who has standing, what consequences count, and how can decisions be challenged?	Distributional and ecological effects, parity, non-domination, revisability

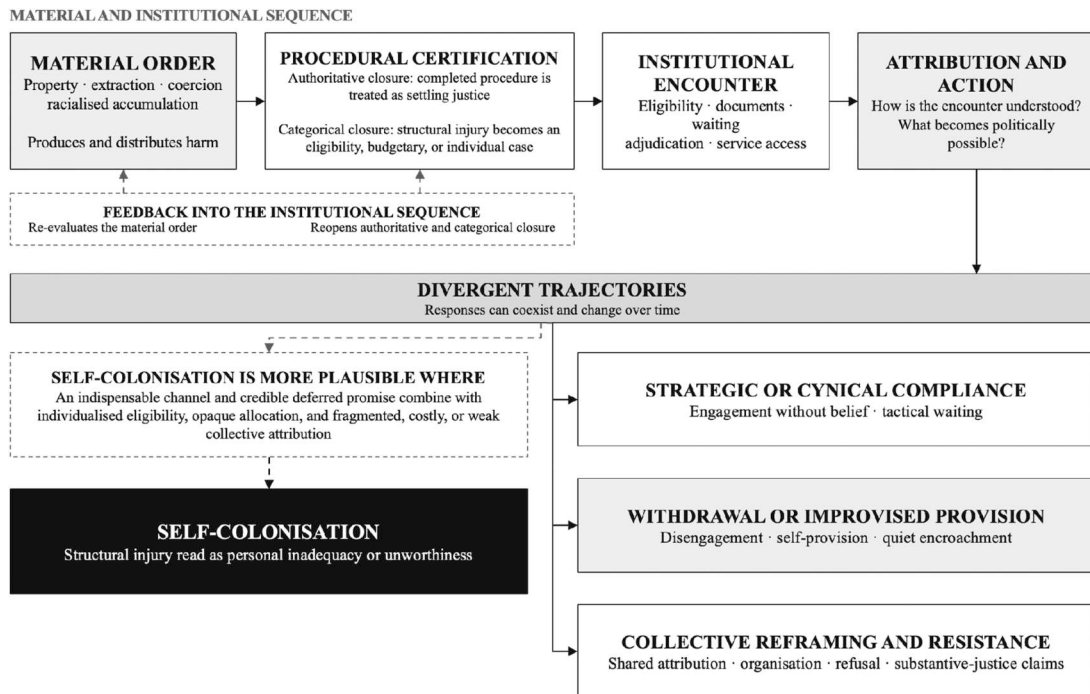


Figure 1. A multi-level and contingent model of the legitimization trap.

Note: Material structures produce harm. Procedural certification and institutional encounters shape how claims become legible, while citizens may respond through several trajectories. Self-colonisation is most plausible under the five conditioning factors shown. Collective action, counter-narratives, and substantive-justice claims can interrupt the sequence and feed back into both procedures and the material order.

while leaving public authority intact. Collective reframing and resistance reopen substantive judgment. The branches can coexist within one person or community and change over time.

Self-colonisation as a conditional pathway

Self-colonisation names the pathway through which an inherited administrative order becomes a grammar of self-evaluation. The concept draws on Fanon's analysis of colonial hierarchy as a material and psychic relation (Fanon, 1952/1986, 1961/2004). Fanon located internalization in a world organized by racial domination and understood political independence as vulnerable to the national bourgeoisie's reproduction of colonial extraction. Recent Fanonian scholarship similarly treats subject formation and collective struggle as inseparable, including in South African movements that rework the meanings of dignity, citizenship, and liberation (Gibson, 2011). Research on colonial trauma in settler states similarly documents how institutionalized violence can be internalized and transmitted across generations, which supports the plausibility of subjective uptake while leaving the attributional sequence proposed here in need of direct evidence (Matheson et al., 2022). Self-colonisation preserves this historical grounding. It concerns formally independent states whose institutions retain colonial categories or relations and whose promises of rights and development are administered through them.

Five conditioning factors specify when this pathway becomes more plausible. First, the authorized channel must control something indispensable, such as housing, income support,

documentation, land recognition, or legal remedy. Second, the promise of eventual inclusion must retain credibility, often because the institution delivers to some claimants or renews its promise through budgets, elections, and policy cycles. Third, eligibility must be individualized, turning structural distribution into a test of one person's documents, conduct, or place in a queue. Fourth, allocation must be sufficiently opaque to obscure how categories and resources produce the outcome. Fifth, collective attribution must be fragmented, costly, or weak relative to merit, responsibility, and patience as available explanations. These conditions can redirect attention from the distribution of power toward the claimant's capacity to meet the institution's demands. They draw on research showing that expectations and attribution shape legitimacy (McLoughlin, 2015), bureaucratic encounters organize waiting and claimant conduct (Auyero, 2011), and intermittent fulfilment sustains hope in an institutional promise (Oldfield & Greyling, 2015). Rose's (1999) account of responsabilisation explains how merit, self-management, and prudent conduct become criteria through which claimants are asked to govern their own welfare. In the present framework, those criteria become self-colonising only when an encounter with a historically formed postcolonial institution converts structural injury into a judgment of personal inadequacy.

The five factors are not uniquely colonial. The narrower diagnosis of self-colonisation requires the institutional demand to reactivate historically racialised or colonial standards of property, deservingness, political standing, or civilisational competence. Evidence must connect contemporary self-evaluation to categories or relations inherited from colonial rule. Without that historical-institutional trace, responsabilisation or system justification is the more accurate explanation.

Deferred expectation describes this temporal relation. An indispensable institutional promise remains credible but repeatedly postponed, keeping claimants oriented toward the authorized channel and turning continued waiting into a test of patience, conduct, and procedural competence. Note that deferred expectation does not imply acquiescence. It can support strategic waiting, cynicism, or mobilization. Combined with individualized assessment, opaque allocation, and weak collective attribution, it can also make self-evaluation a plausible explanation for why fulfilment remains out of reach. This formulation has a direct affinity with Gupta's (2012) account of welfare bureaucracy, where programmes oriented toward care coexist with routine administration that produces arbitrariness and structural violence. Gupta establishes the institutional contradiction, while deferred expectation specifies its possible temporal effect and does not presume self-blame.

The redirection is affective and practical. Long attachment to an unfulfilled promise can wear down the claimant while keeping the promise alive, the structure Berlant (2011) describes as cruel optimism. Repeated requests for proof, good conduct, patience, and self-management can make shame and inadequacy plausible interpretations of exclusion. System-justification research shows how people rationalize arrangements at personal or group cost (Jost & Banaji, 1994) and reproduce status hierarchies over time (Jost et al., 2004). Self-colonisation specifies a narrower institutional sequence: a postcolonial administrative promise, individualized procedural demands, and the translation of exclusion into a deficit of the claimant.

The sequence is a theoretical proposition rather than an observed population-wide fact. The available secondary evidence establishes components of the sequence, not its complete attributional progression. Evidence from South Africa demonstrates why this qualification is necessary. Bureaucratic encounters around Child Support Grants exposed young poor Black women to humiliation, quiet acquiescence, and a hierarchical relation with the state (Gibbs et al., 2018). Those encounters show how administration can produce subordinated subject positions. National survey evidence, however, indicates that South Africans overall attributed poverty more strongly to structural causes than to individual or fatalistic ones (Davids & Gouws, 2013). A subordinating encounter can

therefore coexist with structural critique, and quiet compliance cannot be read as proof of internalized fault. Nor are state blame and self-blame the only explanatory grammars available. Research on legal consciousness in northern Thailand shows how injury can be understood through karma, custom, relational obligation, and changing social ties, shaping whether legal remedy is sought (Engel & Engel, 2010). Self-colonisation must therefore be identified against locally grounded alternatives rather than assumed from non-claiming or continued suffering.

Among those alternatives, the collective trajectory emerges with particular force in the Arab uprisings. Grievances over poor living conditions, unemployment, police brutality, restricted speech, and state arbitrariness became shared frames for protest under severe repression (Dupont & Passy, 2011). The example shows why political grievance must remain a coequal pathway rather than a rupture that the theory treats as exceptional.

Waiting, agency, and alternative trajectories

Bureaucratic waiting makes the variation especially visible. In an ethnography of a welfare office in Buenos Aires, uncertainty and delay taught poor claimants to perform patience and compliant clienthood (Auyero, 2011). South African housing waiting has a different, more internally varied politics. Residents remain registered and legible to the state because the housing channel is indispensable and its promise is periodically made credible through actual delivery. At the same time, they occupy informal spaces, bypass rules, negotiate with officials, and sometimes mobilize. Waiting is simultaneously legitimate and contentious, producing provisional strategic agency rather than a uniformly submissive subject (Oldfield & Greyling, 2015).

Our framework distinguishes four broad trajectories. In a self-colonising trajectory, a person treats exclusion as evidence of inadequate merit, patience, respectability, or procedural competence. Strategic compliance includes tactical waiting and cynical accommodation: claimants perform the required patience while retaining a structural critique or continue participating despite disbelief because the authorized route remains the least bad option. Withdrawal or improvised provision reduces direct reliance on the state, although it can reproduce public power by transferring the costs of infrastructure and care to households. Long-term ethnography in Nigeria shows how entrepreneurial coping with deficient electricity, water, security, transport, and education can sustain inequality and state power while requiring active improvisation and recurrent engagement with officials (Smith, 2022). Structural critique and collective reframing convert an individualized claim into shared political grievance, as movements such as MOSOP and Abahlali baseMjondolo have done.

These trajectories can be shaped by class position and state experience. People who receive intermittent benefits, observe peers succeed, and possess enough documentation to remain eligible may sustain deferred expectation. Those repeatedly excluded from recognition can develop low expectations, rely on non-state arrangements, or encounter public authority mainly through coercion. Organized movements, shared accounts of structural causation, visible corruption, and alternative political institutions strengthen collective attribution. Dependence, isolation, opaque allocation, and the individualization of responsibility make self-colonising uptake more plausible. These conditions are hypotheses for comparative research, and our framework specifies what their observation would require.

Relation to adjacent theories

Self-colonisation is best understood as a configuration within adjacent traditions rather than a replacement for them, and the traditions differ in unit, mechanism, and empirical signature.

Gramscian hegemony concerns the organization of common sense and consent through political and civil society (Gramsci, 1971); a procedural order can form part of that common sense, and strategic compliance may occur with limited consent. Governmentality concerns technologies that shape conduct through expertise, freedom, and self-regulation (Foucault, 1991), and advanced liberal government further individualizes responsibility by asking subjects to govern risk and welfare through themselves (Rose, 1999). System justification concerns motives to defend existing arrangements (Jost & Banaji, 1994), and symbolic violence concerns misrecognition embodied in classificatory schemes (Bourdieu, 1991). In knowledge production, Bourdieusian analysis shows how academics from formerly colonized countries can remain invested in a neo-colonial academic game through a toxic *illusio* that obscures colonial relations, an uptake of a colonial field that does not require normative endorsement (Yalkin & Özbilgin, 2022). Each tradition therefore illuminates a component of the process.

Yet, self-colonisation has a narrower diagnostic. It requires evidence that encounters with historically formed postcolonial institutions translate a structural injury into personal inadequacy. Continued compliance, dependence, or low expectations do not meet that test. The concept therefore identifies a historically and institutionally specified attributional sequence and states the conditions under which it should be absent. These processes can overlap, but they should not be treated as interchangeable. This positioning places the argument explicitly within scholarship on postcolonial subject formation and affective governance. Fanon (1952/1986, 1961/2004) and Gibson (2011) anchor subject formation in racialised institutions and collective struggle; Berlant (2011) and Rose (1999) clarify how hope, attachment, responsibility, and self-management govern conduct. Our paper connects these conversations to procedural certification while retaining their different histories and objects of explanation.

Substantive justice as decolonial praxis

The legitimization trap cannot be answered by dispensing with procedure or by authorizing the state to impose a preferred account of the good. Both responses would enlarge arbitrary power. Substantive justice, on the other hand, reorients legitimacy toward the effects of institutions while retaining procedures that enable people to contest those effects. It is a decolonial praxis of judgment and transformation, grounded in material freedom, equal dignity, and ontological plurality and kept open through affected-party participation, public reason, and revision.

Defining substantive justice

Substantive justice is the material and relational realization of freedom through equitable capabilities, recognitive parity, and ontological plurality. The definition joins traditions that approach justice from different directions. Sen's capability approach evaluates the real opportunities people have to live lives they have reason to value and uses public reasoning to compare remediable injustices amid reasonable disagreement (Sen, 1999, 2009). Fraser's account connects redistribution with the status conditions required for people to participate as peers (Fraser, 1997, 2009). Research on well-being in developing countries similarly rejects income or growth as sufficient measures and examines functioning, needs, resources, agency, and subjective meaning together (Gough & McGregor, 2007). Decolonial thought adds that participation is truncated when a single epistemology determines which injuries are real (Santos, 2014) or one ontology decides which beings and relations enter judgment (Escobar, 2020).

Contributions from African political thought and reparative justice deepen this combination in distinct ways. Nyerere's Ujamaa made human dignity, social obligation, and collective self-reliance criteria of development (Nyerere, 1968). Its political programme generated tensions between communal aspiration and state authority (Fouéré, 2014). Ubuntu has several competing normative interpretations rather than one culturally settled meaning; a prominent reconstruction locates its moral force in relations of identification, solidarity, and the prevention of discord (Metz, 2007). Reparative justice frames redistribution as constructive world-making, the creation of capabilities and institutions able to repair the ongoing effects of colonial and racial domination (Táíwò, 2022). Recent legal scholarship grounds the same demand in the continuing wrong of colonial unjust enrichment and proposes legal tools for its redress (Castellino, 2025). Anticolonial projects of self-determination further insist that political freedom includes the collective capacity to make worlds after empire (Getachew, 2019).

These genealogies do not make substantive justice the property of one civilization. European traditions contain egalitarian and inegalitarian possibilities, as do Indigenous and African traditions. Provenance alone cannot decide whether a norm distributes resources fairly, protects dignity, or enables domination. Buen vivir demonstrates the point. It has provided social movements with a language for challenging developmentalism and ecological destruction (Merino, 2016). Its adoption as Bolivian state policy has also exposed co-optation, bureaucratization, and continued extractivism (Ranta, 2016). Ontological recognition is therefore a dimension of justice whose consequences remain subject to redistributive and recognitive evaluation.

Substantive justice does not claim to replace these traditions. Its distinct analytical increment lies in the relation it constructs among them and the problem to which that relation is applied. Capabilities and well-being assess real opportunities and multidimensional lives; recognition and care expose status hierarchy and interdependence; ubuntu and buen vivir articulate relational and ecological visions of the good. The framework makes redistribution, recognition, and ontological plurality reciprocal tests within an analysis of postcolonial legitimation. It asks how each vision can conceal domination in the other two dimensions and keeps their conflict open through affected standing, parity, non-domination, and revisability.

The three pillars of substantive justice

The three pillars operate as mutually corrective questions. The redistributive question asks who controls resources, who receives their benefits, and who bears their costs. Legal state ownership or aggregate growth cannot answer it. The relevant evidence includes disaggregated capabilities, ecological burdens, unpaid care, and the movement of value through state and corporate arrangements. Redistribution without recognition can remain paternalistic when authorities deliver goods while withholding equal standing from recipients.

The recognitive question asks whose dignity, status, and voice are institutionally secured. Housing, food, safety, health, and bodily integrity are present claims rather than rewards at the end of an indefinite administrative sequence. Recognition without redistribution can become ceremonial, granting visibility while leaving control over land, labour, and revenue unchanged. Care ethics sharpens this pillar by treating dependency and care as public concerns whose burdens and resources are politically distributed (Tronto, 2013). It resists an image of flourishing built around the self-sufficient individual.

The ontological question asks which entities, relations, and forms of knowledge can ground public judgment. Governance organized around one Western reality can admit Indigenous

representatives while excluding the relations to land, ancestors, rivers, and nonhuman life that give their claims meaning (Escobar, 2020). Extractive and settler orders also target the adaptive ecological relations through which Indigenous communities respond to environmental change, which makes ecological consequence internal to this question (Whyte, 2016). Ontological plurality without recognitive and redistributive checks can nonetheless protect hierarchy within communities, romanticize tradition, or allow cultural authority to silence women, minorities, lower-status groups, and dissenters (Fraser, 2009). Notably, these three pillars provide no automatic harmony. Their friction is part of the framework's analytical work.

Adjudicating contested flourishing

Flourishing is culturally variable and politically disputed. A state cannot infer it from aggregate well-being, a canonical tradition, or an official declaration of Indigenous values. Substantive justice handles this disagreement through five linked safeguards. Affected standing gives those who bear the material and ecological costs of a decision a central role in defining the injury and evaluating proposed remedies. Participatory parity requires resources, status, and political voice (Fraser, 1997, 2009); reparative justice requires inherited burdens to be redressed (Táíwò, 2022). A non-domination floor rules out arrangements that secure one group's vision of flourishing through another's severe deprivation, subordination, or coerced silence. Attention to care and ecological consequences tracks dependencies and displaced burdens that formal standing alone can leave obscure. Revisability keeps decisions open when their consequences disclose new harms or exclusions. Affected status itself is contestable: it can include internally dissenting members, future generations, and ecological relations whose interests require accountable forms of representation. No representative claim is exempt from challenge or revision.

These safeguards combine procedural protections with substantive attention to care and ecological consequence, which is precisely the point. Substantive justice depends on fair procedures while refusing to treat their completion as the end of judgment. Public reasoning cannot guarantee consensus, and affected communities can contain unequal power. It can make reasons answerable to those who live with their consequences, expose concentrated burdens, and permit correction. The relation is reciprocal: substantive conditions make participation meaningful, and procedures make competing accounts of substantive justice contestable. The framework rejects outcomes when affected people lack contestable standing, when parity is absent, or when one group's gains rest on another's severe deprivation, coerced silence, or displaced ecological harm. Revisability keeps judgment open; it cannot justify deferring remedy indefinitely.

Consider an extractive project that funds poverty reduction while damaging Indigenous territory. Redistribution supports the social programmes; ontological justice recognizes a relation to land that cannot be reduced to compensation; recognition requires Indigenous peoples to participate as political equals rather than cultural stakeholders. The framework does not supply an algorithmic answer. It asks whether affected communities can refuse or reshape the project, whether essential capabilities are secured without concentrating harm, whose knowledge defines the damage, how benefits and burdens are distributed, and whether the decision can be reopened. This form of adjudication distinguishes pluralism from relativism and substantive judgment from paternalism.

Figure 2 shows the architecture. Redistribution, recognition, and ontological plurality each evaluate the other two. A surrounding field of affected standing, participatory parity, non-domination, care, and revisability keeps their conflicts politically open.

Practices of interruption

As praxis, the framework becomes a set of practices through which the legitimization trap is reopened. Redistributive claim-making follows value from extraction to beneficiary and traces the displacement of ecological and caring costs. Recognitive refusal rejects the deferral of dignity and treats housing, food, safety, and bodily integrity as current obligations. Ontological assertion brings suppressed relations and worlds into governance as foundations for judgment. Procedural defence protects access to reasons, hearings, evidence, appeal, and collective organization from arbitrary power.

These practices target different operations of the trap. Redistributive tracing reconnects administrative decisions to the material order. Recognitive and ontological claims contest categories that exclude injuries and relations from institutional view. Affected standing, appeal, and revisability reopen authoritative closure after a procedure has declared its work complete.

These practices operate through budget struggles, court cases, street occupations, anti-extraction campaigns, constitutional demands, mutual provision, and the reconstruction of grievance as shared. They do not turn substantive justice into another state metric. They keep legitimacy answerable to material lives and preserve the means through which people can contest what flourishing requires.

Three illustrations that complicate the framework

The following three illustrations perform different analytical tasks. Nigeria separates the property and political-economic production of dispossession from its legal certification. South Africa shows

CONTESTABLE DEMOCRATIC SAFEGUARDS KEEP JUDGMENT OPEN

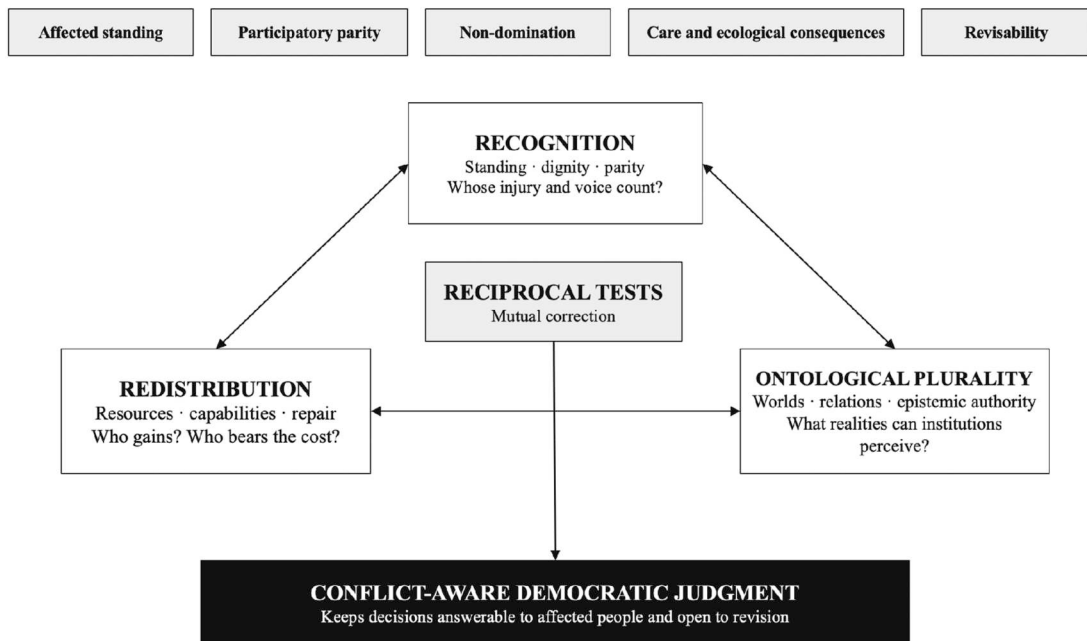


Figure 2. Substantive justice as conflict-aware democratic judgment.

Note: Redistribution, recognition, and ontological plurality operate as mutual correctives. Affected standing, participatory parity, non-domination, attention to care and ecological consequences, and revisability provide democratic safeguards without treating completed procedure as sufficient evidence of justice.

how a rights-bearing procedure can produce waiting alongside strategic agency, structural critique, and possible subordinating effects. Bolivia exposes conflict among redistribution, ontological recognition, and Indigenous self-determination. The cases were selected to place pressure on the framework rather than demonstrate a uniform postcolonial psychology. Their asymmetrical division of analytical labour is intentional.

Nigeria: property, legal authorization, and resistance

Nigeria's petroleum economy reveals why procedure cannot carry the causal burden for extraction. Under Nigerian law, petroleum resources are vested in the federal government for the benefit of all Nigerians (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, Section 44(3); Petroleum Industry Act, 2021). Onshore production in the Delta has long been organized through joint ventures linking the state and corporate partners (Watts, 2004). In the best-known SPDC venture, NNPC retains a 55 per cent stake; following Shell's 2025 divestment, Renaissance holds the former Shell interest, with Total Exploration and Production Nigeria Limited and Agip Energy and Natural Resources (Nigeria) Limited as the other partners (Shell, 2025). Constitutional ownership, corporate rights, and revenue-allocation formulae make the extractive order legally operable.

The material drivers lie in the property regime and the state-corporate organization of oil rents. State-corporate joint ventures and global petroleum markets organize the accumulation of oil profits (Watts, 2004). Spills, flaring, contaminated water and soil, and damaged farming and fishing livelihoods are concentrated in wellhead communities (Adunbi, 2015). Racialised global accumulation and Nigeria's rentier political economy shape this distribution. Procedure certifies ownership, allocates revenue, and classifies ecological damage within the existing property order. The legitimization trap appears when this legal and allocative completion is allowed to settle the justice of the order itself.

The case provides no warrant for inferring that affected citizens internalize deprivation as personal failure. Evidence instead shows critique, ambivalence, adaptation, and resistance. Popular narratives in southeastern Nigeria connect spectacular wealth to inequality, patron-client relations, occult explanation, ambivalence, and critical awareness (Smith, 2001). This evidence does not establish how Delta communities interpret oil dispossession, but it cautions against treating Nigerian hardship as an uncomplicated grammar of personal failure. Households improvise electricity, water, transport, security, and education in response to deficient public infrastructure, practices that can reproduce state power and inequality while displaying active agency (Smith, 2022). The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People made the structural attribution explicit by connecting oil extraction to environmental devastation, health, political marginalization, and the distribution of revenue (Saro-Wiwa, 1992).

Against our framework's strict threshold, Nigeria establishes the material order and its procedural certification, while the available sources identify conditions under which authoritative closure can develop rather than documenting an institution that treats procedural completion as an exhaustive answer to justice. In transnational litigation over Delta pollution, affected communities spent years contesting jurisdiction before the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom held that their claims against the parent company could proceed (*Okpabi and others v Royal Dutch Shell Plc and another*, 2021). This history demonstrates procedural deferral and the cost of reaching the merits; it does not by itself show that procedure was offered as a sufficient account of justice. Ogoniland's remediation reveals a related distinction. The United Nations Environment Programme documented severe contamination and recommended comprehensive restoration, together with an

institutional architecture for implementing it (UNEP, 2011). Such structures make remediation administratively operable and open to monitoring, but their milestones must be compared with material restoration before they can count as evidence of closure. Nigeria therefore remains a boundary case: the legal and administrative architecture makes closure possible, while organized resistance keeps substantive judgment open.

Nigeria therefore illustrates procedural certification and its limits. The property order is administered in the people's name, yet organized resistance contests who benefits and who bears the costs. Redistributive justice follows value across the state-corporate arrangement and treats ecological repair, community power, and the distribution of rents as questions that formal public ownership leaves unresolved. Recognitive claims arise as Delta communities contest the distribution of oil wealth (Saro-Wiwa, 1992), and ontological claims arise as they defend relations to land and water externalized by extractive property (Adunbi, 2015).

South Africa: rights, waiting, and strategic action

South Africa reveals both the value of procedure and the politics of deferral. The post-apartheid Constitution establishes socio-economic rights, including access to adequate housing. Irene Grootboom and other residents of an informal settlement lived without water, sewage, or refuse removal. After they occupied land earmarked for low-cost housing, they were evicted and their shelters destroyed. Their claim reached the Constitutional Court because rights, reasons, and judicial review created an avenue through which state policy could be challenged.

The government relied on housing programmes, budgets, waiting lists, and the constitutional principle of progressive realization within available resources. The Court held that a programme excluding a significant segment of society could not be reasonable, and it found the national programme wanting precisely because no provision was made for relief to those in desperate need (Government of the Republic of South Africa and Others v Grootboom and Others, 2000, paras. 43, 66). Procedure here enabled a substantive challenge to administrative deferral. The later outcome remained grievously limited. Grootboom died in 2008 without receiving permanent housing (Joubert, 2008). A rights-bearing judgment changed the standard of reasonableness while leaving the material claim unmet.

Housing waiting also shows why continued procedural engagement cannot be equated with belief or submission. Qualitative research in Cape Town found that residents continued to register, wait, hope, and make themselves legible because formal housing remained an indispensable and occasionally fulfilled state promise. They also occupied informal space, sidestepped rules, negotiated with officials, and mobilized. Waiting was both legitimate and contentious, producing provisional strategic agency (Oldfield & Greyling, 2015). Abahlali baseMjondolo makes the collective trajectory visible by asserting the current dignity and political voice of shack dwellers against indefinite deferral (Gibson, 2011).

The case does contain evidence of subordinating encounters. Research on access to Child Support Grants found that bureaucratic practices could humiliate young poor Black women and compel quiet acquiescence (Gibbs et al., 2018). This cross-domain evidence identifies subordinating encounters within the same constitutional welfare state; it does not establish the psychology of housing claimants or a uniquely colonial cause. It establishes a component that could enter a self-colonising sequence. South Africa instead demonstrates variation within the same rights regime: procedure as protection, deferral, strategic dependence, humiliation, quiet encroachment (Bayat, 2010), and organized refusal.

The housing system supplies the clearest instance of categorical closure: a structural housing claim is repeatedly translated into queue position, programme coverage, and budgetary progress. *Grootboom*, by contrast, shows judicial review reopening authoritative closure by making the reasonableness of the programme contestable.

Bolivia: plurinational recognition and extractive conflict

Bolivia places the normative framework under its greatest strain. The 2009 Constitution declares a plurinational state grounded in political, economic, legal, cultural, and linguistic pluralism (Article 1) and includes *vivir bien* among the ethical-moral principles of plural society (Article 8) (Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, 2009). Law No. 071 recognizes Mother Earth as a collective subject of public interest and enumerates rights to life, diversity, water, clean air, balance, restoration, and freedom from contamination (Law No. 071, 2010). These changes gave legal and political presence to relations that colonial and republican institutions had excluded.

The ontological shift is consequential, and Andean scholarship makes its stakes legible. In the Peruvian Andes, Indigenous political claims can concern relations of reciprocity with mountains, rivers, earth, and other beings whose agency exceeds Western categories of property and resource (de la Cadena, 2015). This conceptual vocabulary illuminates the stakes of Bolivia's constitutional change; it is not offered as Bolivian case evidence. *Vivir bien* also provided movements with a language for challenging development as unlimited growth. Its movement and state forms have diverged, however. Ethnographic analysis of its translation into policy documents how a decolonial alternative can be absorbed into the institutions and developmental strategies it sought to transform (Ranta, 2016).

Extractive redistribution intensifies the conflict. Hydrocarbon and mineral revenues funded welfare and poverty reduction, while extraction continued to damage Indigenous territories and concentrate authority in the state. The TIPNIS conflict exposed the contradiction when the government pursued a highway through Indigenous territory and a protected area despite opposition. The broader Morales-era project combined important gains for Indigenous majorities with power consolidation and extractivist development (Postero, 2017). Constitutional recognition therefore changed the field of politics without ensuring ontological or material justice.

The Chaco provides a more granular view. Indigenous representatives entered plurinational institutions while racialised inequalities, clientelist relations, bureaucratic constraints, fragmented land rights, and the state's dependence on gas limited what representation could achieve. Indigenous actors nevertheless used those spaces strategically to pursue territorial and redistributive claims and retained critical agendas beyond the state (Anthias, 2022). This is neither uncomplicated recognition nor simple co-optation. It is a politics of navigating a pluri-extractivist state.

The political field gathered under indigeneity is itself heterogeneous. Ethnographic work identifies tensions between ethnically defined rights, class-based social claims, and a state project that presents extraction as the common good (Lalander, 2017). The politicization of indigeneity as a legal identity is itself part of the colonial legacy, which cautions against treating it as a unified political subject (Mamdani, 2001). Unequal access to representation, territory, and state patronage means that plurinational recognition can amplify some Indigenous positions while constraining others (Anthias, 2022). Decolonial language therefore cannot substitute for inquiry into whose authority is institutionalized and whose dissent remains marginal.

Bolivia most clearly displays categorical closure. Ontological claims enter constitutional and policy categories (Postero, 2017), while extractive development remains the governing horizon (Ranta,

2016). The case does not establish self-colonisation; it shows how recognition can widen standing while narrowing the institutional form in which a claim becomes actionable.

Bolivia thus demonstrates why ontological provenance cannot certify justice. Indigenous ideas can be plural, contested, and institutionally appropriated. A plurinational procedure can widen standing while subordinating territorial autonomy to extraction. Substantive justice asks how redistributive gains, ecological relations, dissent within and across communities, and concentrated burdens are adjudicated together. The case supplies no final resolution; it exposes the conflict the framework must keep open.

Comparative reflections

Together these cases yield several comparative insights. First, the substantive order and its procedural certification must remain separate in causal analysis. Property and extraction drive Nigeria's oil dispossession; law and allocation authorize the property order. Constitutional rights create claims in South Africa, while procedures can defer fulfilment of the corresponding material claims. Plurinational recognition transforms Bolivian institutions while extractive development constrains its reach.

Second, procedural certification does not predict one subjective response. Nigerian critique and self-provision, South African waiting and mobilization, and Bolivian strategic participation all combine engagement with forms of distrust or resistance. Self-colonising uptake is most defensible as a conditional possibility within these encounters, supported where humiliation and individualized responsibility are directly observed and withheld where the evidence shows structural attribution.

Third, the pillars of substantive justice cannot be realized one at a time. Redistribution can fund welfare through extraction; recognition can remain materially empty; ontological inclusion can be narrowed by state power or internal exclusion. Their mutual correction, protected by contestable procedures, turns substantive justice into a continuing practice of assessment rather than a destination or civilisational formula.

Discussion

Our framework makes three contributions. The first is to legitimacy scholarship. Legitimate authority depends on rule conformity, justifiability, and expressed consent (Beetham, 1991). African survey evidence further shows that institutional trustworthiness and procedural justice shape citizens' legitimating beliefs (Levi et al., 2009). Postcolonial state legitimacy is further shaped by inherited territorial and institutional histories that condition development and elite choices (Englebert, 2000). The framework specifies a multi-level relation within this broader problem. Racialised property regimes, extractive political economies, and coercive state practices produce and distribute harm. Administrative procedures then classify claims, certify decisions, and represent the resulting order as impersonal and proper. At the level of everyday encounter, these representations can narrow the terms on which citizens can make their grievances legible. The legitimization trap therefore identifies a contingent configuration linking material order, procedural certification, and subjective response. It does not assign extraction to procedure or collapse legitimacy into citizen satisfaction.

This account also clarifies the ambivalence of procedure. Elections, hearings, reason-giving, courts, and review can restrain arbitrary power and provide resources for contestation. The

Grootboom litigation demonstrates precisely this capacity. The trap closes when procedural regularity is allowed to exhaust the meaning of justice, especially when delay, classification, or audit repeatedly substitutes evidence of administrative propriety for repair of the underlying injury. Procedure can consequently function as safeguard, medium of struggle, technology of rule, and certificate of legitimacy. Which function predominates is an empirical question. This conditional formulation joins legitimation through procedure (Luhmann, 1969), the rule of law's constraints on arbitrary power (Thompson, 1975), document-based administrative classification (Hull, 2012), audit's preference for verifiable compliance (Power, 1997), and bureaucratic structural violence (Gupta, 2012).

The second contribution concerns postcolonial subjectivity. The concept of self-colonisation does not name a universal disposition among citizens of postcolonial states. It identifies one pathway through which institutional encounters may individualize structural failure. That pathway becomes more plausible when access is individualized, procedural promises remain credible, small or intermittent deliveries keep hope alive, meritocratic discourse is institutionally reinforced, and counter-narratives or collective organization are weak. Humiliating encounters can then convert a claim about rights into an examination of the claimant's worth. People may rationalize status hierarchy (Jost & Banaji, 1994), treat institutional arrangements as common sense (Gramsci, 1971), govern themselves through responsibility (Rose, 1999), and remain attached to injurious promises (Berlant, 2011). Our synthesis locates these mechanisms within historically formed postcolonial institutions and connects them to the procedural certification of material inequality.

The framework equally predicts that the pathway will often fail. Citizens may blame the state, identify capitalist or colonial structures, comply strategically while withholding belief, disengage, or organize resistance. South African surveys show structural attribution outweighing individual or fatalistic explanations of poverty (Davids & Gouws, 2013), while popular critique in southeastern Nigeria prevents treating hardship as internalization (Smith, 2001). Waiting can also be tactical and contentious rather than passive (Oldfield & Greyling, 2015). Self-colonisation should therefore be studied through direct evidence of attribution, affect, and practice, ideally across class positions and institutional settings and over time. The relevant question is how encounters transform political interpretation, not whether deprivation exists.

The third contribution is a conflict-aware account of substantive justice. Redistribution, recognition, and ontological plurality are mutually corrective criteria for judging institutions. Each pillar pursued alone carries a characteristic danger: administrative humiliation delivered with material goods, identities celebrated while property relations stay untouched, and community romanticized in ways that obscure internal exclusion or permit extractivism under decolonial language. Bolivia makes the last danger especially visible. The provenance of a claim does not secure its emancipatory effects.

This formulation places substantive justice in conversation with capabilities (Sen, 1999), reparative justice (Táíwò, 2022), *buen vivir* (Ranta, 2016), *ubuntu* (Metz, 2007), and democratic care (Tronto, 2013). It also answers the question of who defines flourishing. No state, expert, movement, or inherited tradition receives final authority to do so. Judgments should be made through procedures that give affected people standing, enable parity of participation, disclose material and ecological consequences, test claims against non-domination, and remain open to revision. Such procedures do not guarantee justice. They make substantive claims contestable and expose the distribution of authority within the decision itself.

These contributions have implications for inquiry and practice. First, studies of legitimacy should trace movement across levels rather than infer citizen belief from institutional form or

aggregate performance. Researchers can examine how property rules and extraction create an injury, how documents and procedures translate it, which responses encounters elicit, and when collective interpretation interrupts the translation. Second, administrative reforms should be assessed for their distributional and subjective effects as well as their procedural integrity. Shorter queues or cleaner audits may matter greatly, yet they cannot compensate for unjust eligibility rules, dispossession, or the absence of remedy. Third, the three justice dimensions should operate as reciprocal tests in policy design and political mobilization. Each asks what the others conceal.

Our argument has clear limits. The three cases discussed above are theory-building illustrations, not a comparative empirical test. They reveal distinct parts of the framework and several boundary conditions. They also trace cross-scalar political economy unevenly: Nigeria makes global-national mediation most visible, while South Africa and Bolivia foreground institutional and normative dynamics. Direct research is needed to establish how frequently self-colonising attributions occur and how they vary by class, race, gender, generation, and institutional domain. The framework also centres state encounters, although corporations, international financial institutions, donors, and professional intermediaries help produce the material and discursive order at issue. Finally, substantive justice remains an orientation for democratic judgment rather than a settled institutional design. Its value depends on sustained conflict, affected participation, and revisability. These limits define a research programme: comparative and longitudinal studies can identify when procedural legitimacy stabilizes dispossession, when it becomes a resource for challenge, and which forms of organization reopen political possibility.

Conclusion

The legitimization trap describes a contingent relation among material injustice, procedural certification, and constrained political interpretation. Property regimes, extraction, and coercion produce the underlying harms. Procedure can restrain these forces and equip citizens to challenge them. It becomes part of the trap when administrative propriety stands in for repair and narrows the language in which injury can be recognized. Self-colonisation is one possible result, alongside strategic or cynical compliance, withdrawal, and structural critique or resistance.

Substantive justice redirects legitimacy toward redistribution, recognition, and ontological plurality while retaining contestable procedure as a safeguard against domination. These dimensions offer no frictionless endpoint. They provide reciprocal tests through which affected people can expose what formally proper institutions leave undisturbed. The political task is thus to keep procedure answerable to flourishing and flourishing open to democratic dispute.

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