Settler Entanglements from Citrus Production to Historical Memory

Forthcoming in MER issue 302 "Settler Colonialism's Enduring Entanglements"

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All architects of settler colonies have been obsessed with land: who occupies it, how it is cultivated and what forms of labor are required to make it productive.

In the nineteenth century the issue of how to manage colonized lands led imperial powers to introduce various economic and legal structures and construct new racial hierarchies in response to the unique challenges of each territory. Colonists introduced (or transformed) conceptions of racial difference, contended with specific environmental obstacles borne of local ecologies and navigated competing metropolitan ideas about colonization. Sometimes studying a single commodity such as citrus can shed light on how a common set of tropes and strategies structured these disparate approaches. By introducing new forms of agriculture, settlers often expressed a drive to remake the landscape and promised moral as well as economic advancement to the subjects they colonized—even though the possibility of physical or cultural elimination of Indigenous groups was an ever-present threat.

Poster by Henri Dormoy in 1930 for the centennial anniversary of French colonization of Algeria. Credit Coll. Galdoc-Grob/Kharbine-Tapabor.

Individuals who participated in fashioning settler colonies, along with their metropolitan supporters, often lay claim to a form of exceptionalism. The United States couched its supposed uniqueness in terms of a city on a hill, the Zionist movement points to the status of Jews as a "chosen people" and France boasted the promises of the civilizing mission. Settler colonial regimes past and present have devised rhetorical strategies to distinguish their own system of rule from others, to disavow the structural violence of settlement that is common to them all and to obscure a set of broader relationships.

They are, however, not exceptional. Disparate settler colonial regimes are entangled with each other; they continue to be established and sustained by ideological, economic and political strategies that developed in a transnational framework. Ignoring these connections or examining settler-colonial regimes as discrete case studies has political consequences. This approach undermines the analysis of settler colonialism as a structure that was developed across national borders and allows contemporary debates to focus on settler colonialism as a discrete event, rather than historical structure. For historian Patrick Wolfe, settler colonialism is a structure, not an event, meaning that the project should be defined by long-term contests for land rather than the initial violence of conquest.[1] It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that communities fighting against settler colonialism often deliberately highlight the commonalities between regimes as a tool to build solidarity.

Shared Ideological Tropes

The settlers, politicians and planners who were invested in the project of colonization participated in a global discussion on race, land and political economy. They viewed their activities through a common set of ideological tropes, making sense of their policies in a comparative framework. For example, as French colonial planners and politicians debated various possibilities for what to do with the Algerians following the conquest in 1830—including extermination, resettlement and assimilation—they often referenced the United States. Eugène Bodichon, a progressive republican who wrote frequently on Algerian policy in the 1830s, believed that the Algerians would experience a fate similar to the "auto-genocide" of the American Indians. This theme was popularized in French literary narratives in the first half of the nineteenth century.[2] Similarly, early Zionists in Palestine saw manual labor and agriculture as having a redemptive value and modeled their settlements on France's colonization of Algeria.[3]

Different settler colonial projects drew upon similar concepts to sustain the myths of their own indigeneity and self-sufficiency. By the end of the nineteenth century, close to 700,000 Europeans lived in Algeria. These new arrivals not only took most of the fertile land for their own use, they also claimed the moniker

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of "Algerian" for themselves. (Actual Algerians were pejoratively referred to as "natives," Muslims or Jews.) European Algerians' self-ascribed identity as hardy pioneers bore similarities to identities common in the Yishuv, the Zionist movement's name for the Jewish settler community in Palestine before Israel's establishment in 1948. In the late nineteenth century, many Jews who settled in Ottoman Palestine after fleeing antisemitism in Eastern Europe were fascinated by the figure of the cowboy, that mythical figure who embodied the virtues of chivalry and generosity and bore traces of rebellion and rugged individualism. William Frederick Cody (known as Buffalo Bill) drew enormous crowds in Paris at the 1889 *Exposition Universelle* and inspired articles in Algerian newspapers. Theodor Herzl himself compared Jewish riders in Palestine to cowboys during an 1898 visit to the region.[4] This pioneer identity underpinned the fantasy of self-sufficiency held by the Europeans who settled in Algeria even as the colonial state provided the credit, land and infrastructure required for the large-scale industrialized agriculture they needed to prosper.

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Citrus and Settlement

In the nineteenth century, citrus (in addition to wine) came to symbolize the landscapes of settler colonies. Large-scale citrus production in the United States, Palestine and Algeria informed settler identity, shaped discourses about the land and created connections between settler colonies established by different countries. The development of a citrus industry required extensive state investment in credit and the construction of dams. It also relied on a host of technologies that ensured the standardization, preservation and shipping of delicate fruit—processes that were made possible by global capitalist integration in the late nineteenth century.

Settlers in California, Algeria and Palestine intensified the cultivation of this typically Mediterranean commodity upon their arrival. In the 1830s, citrus farms occupied just 420 acres of the Algerian countryside. By the 1950s that figure had reached 61,750.[5] While Palestinian citriculture pre-dated the arrival of Jewish settlers, especially around Jaffa, the rapid development of dams and the expansion of European markets caused Jewish citrus production to increase exponentially under the British Mandate (1920–1948). Similarly, California experienced a "citrus rush" from 1890 to 1945 that generated more income than the better-known gold rush.

Colonial planners in all three territories drew connections between citriculture and what they called "Mediterranean civilization"—not only through physical transformation of the landscapes, but also by participating in creating the idea of a new Mediterranean race. In both Algeria and the Yishuv, intellectuals proclaimed a local vernacular of Mediterranean identity from the 1930s to the 1950s—such as Albert Camus' "Mediterranean humanism" or the notion of a "Mediterranean option" that was invoked by Israeli artists and writers to naturalize their presence on the land.[6] In the United States, it is still possible to read tourist guides in California boasting of how oranges "transformed the deserts of Southern California into a Mediterranean Oasis." [7]

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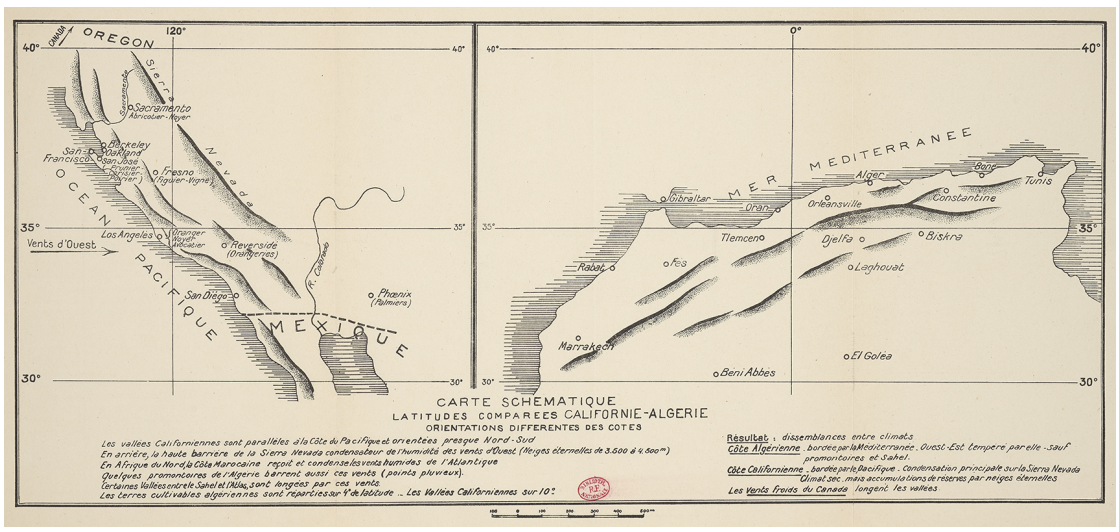
Despite these ideological renderings, citrus production was less a sign of a new mode of (mythical) Mediterranean co-existence than the product of a racialized system of labor. In California, Chinese, Japanese and Indigenous men provided cheap labor from the mid-1890s through 1914, though they were replaced by Mexican laborers after World War I.[8] Jewish citrus farmers in Palestine continued to employ low-paid native Palestinian Arabs even after the birth of the Labor Zionist campaign to "conquer" Palestine's labor market for Jewish immigrants. This racial capitalist logic also underpinned citriculture in Algeria, where Muslim laborers carried out many of the manual tasks and helped keep costs down on French orchards.



French government map depicting the similarities between California and Algeria featured in a study on fruit production published in 1933. Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF)

Commonalities among labor practices, and the use of racial categories as an organizing principle for recruitment, are not the only ways in which citrus offers a window into how settler colonial regimes employed similar tactics. Discrepant settler colonial projects were also enmeshed through their citrus industries' promotion and circulation of scientific knowledge. Agronomists in the Yishuv and Algeria (as well as Morocco) studied California's experience with citrus from the interwar period through decolonization in the late 1950s. French and Zionist planners visited the Golden State, bringing back technical ideas and political optimism. As one French planner who traveled to the United States wrote in 1932, thanks to irrigation the government could hope for an "influx of French farmers, of workers, of small capitalists, [all] attracted by the new evolution of Algeria that will be populated by more French nationals and that will become a real extension of France."[9]

In the early years after the 1948 Nakba—the expulsion of Palestinians from their land and homes by Zionist forces—and the establishment of Israel, citrus became a venue for French cooperation with the nascent state. When the National School of Agriculture in Algiers sent students to Israel to study citrus farming in 1958, the official report noted that despite the country's "isolation in the midst of a hostile world that unites its forces [planning] for future attacks," Israel "knows what it wants and has faith in its future."[10] This description was clearly meant as a partial explanation of why Israel had been chosen as the site for this visit. The report also invoked Herzl and his belief that a "new race of Jews" would emerge from the soil.[11] These shared imaginaries continued during decolonization, as some French politicians in the 1950s viewed Israel as a model for partitioning Algerian territory into separate French and "Arab" states. Later in the decade, Israeli officials depicted Palestinian citizens who agitated against the state's restrictions on their movement, employment and political rights (and who analyzed these policies in a broader settler-colonial context) as would-be Algerian rebels.[12]

Settler Fantasies of Reconciliation

The large-scale production of citrus is just one example of the myriad links—both economic and ideological—that bound different settler-colonial projects. These ties were multiple; they included a common set of cultural imaginaries, economic practices and geographical commitments. Yet despite these similarities, some observers continue to depict their own national history of settler colonialism as singular. This focus on the exceptional nature of a particular settler colony serves to obscure the transcolonial reality of empire as it developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The question of whether settler colonies should be studied in isolation or across space and time is not an arcane matter of academic methodology. Contemporary commentators on colonial history (especially those with links to the state) are not merely demonstrating a lack of curiosity or historical myopia in insisting on a national frame. Instead, the assertion of exceptionality can be read as a particular kind of settler fantasy that promises an easier path to reconciliation.[13] Reconciliation can be defined as an attempt to make discrepant views of history compatible, therefore ending acrimonious debates surrounding historical memory. A second definition, of restoring amicable relations between colonial perpetrators and their victims, is also relevant. In both cases, settler-colonial states are keen to "move on" from debates on colonial crimes, seeking ways to avoid the messy work of introducing social justice in the wake of decolonization. By insisting that the history of France (or Israel or the United States) is entirely unique, analysts obscure the broader structural questions at the heart of settlement. Observers should understand contemporary analyses of settler colonialism that focus on the event (rather than structure) of decolonization in light of the fantasy that reconciliation is possible, or even desirable.

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In recent years French President Emmanuel Macron has initiated an official policy that seeks a "reconciliation of memories" with Algeria in order to "calm" (*apaiser*) the relationship between the two countries. In January 2021, the government released a report it commissioned to study France's colonial history in Algeria and recommend a series of measures to address the effects of ongoing historical grievances (relating, for example, to the question of nuclear testing in the Sahara, the repatriation of archives and the cemeteries of Europeans in Algeria). Entitled "France-Algeria: Painful Passions," it was authored by Jewish and Algerian-born historian Benjamin Stora. The document is a strange mix of historiography—covering recent trends in scholarship—and political history, delineating France's official attempts to come to terms with its colonial past over the last two decades. Stora focuses narrowly on the War of Independence (1954–1962), an eight-year conflict whose brutality serves to substantiate his claim about the "singularity" of French Algeria. Echoing a common discourse in France, he presents the colonization of Algeria (condensed in the War of Independence) as incommensurate with other histories of settlement: as an event, rather than a structure. Algeria is also rendered exceptional by an account told through the lens of pathology and emotional attachments. This framing obscures the commonalities between Algeria and California (or Israel) that informed colonial policies (see the map above).

Cartoon by the Algerian artist Dilem, December 6, 2021. Algerian President Abdelmajid Tebboune walks alongside Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas who asks, "What is it like living next to an Israeli colony," with the Moroccan flag flying prominently in the background. The heading reads: "The Palestinian President on an official visit to Algeria." Available on the artist's Facebook page.

An example of a common framework that shaped settler-colonial experiences in Israel and French Algeria is the role of religion. In both cases, religion worked as a form of "racial amnesty"—in the sense that Algerian and Israeli Jews fared better than the Muslim inhabitants of these lands.[14] Jews in Algeria received French citizenship in 1870 (something unavailable to Muslims until 1958), and Israel continues to grant citizenship to Jews anywhere in the world. As the scholar Ariella Azoulay has argued, both French and Israeli settlement thus relied on a fabricated "Judeo-Christian tradition," in which Judaism was included in "Western civilization" while Muslims were excluded as foreign.[15]

Stora's report prompted some commentators to write about anti-Jewish sentiment in Algeria without considering the role of Israeli and French government policies in shaping Algerian public opinion. In a recent essay in the *New York Review of Books,* literary critic Alice Kaplan attributes the outcry against the Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's invitation of the Constantine-born Jewish musician Enrico Macias to visit his native city in 2000 to a resurgence in Algerian antisemitism.[16] Kaplan's analysis overlooks Macias' vocal support for the state of Israel and its military. She also fails to mention that his visit was supported by future French president Nicolas Sarkozy, a close friend who was eager to promote a new initiative for Mediterranean (i.e., European) cooperation with Algeria. Instead of reflecting on how religious identities in both Algeria and Israel have been used to divide Indigenous communities, Kaplan seems to lay the blame squarely on Muslim intolerance. These omissions and inconvenient truths present another example of how ignoring tangled settler-colonial relationships and common structures can lead to a myopic view of the present. Indeed, support for Israel by French Jews has been a reoccurring obstacle to the formation of a united front against Islamophobia and antisemitism in France since the 1980s.

While metropolitan intellectuals close to the state tend to focus on their settler-colonial history as an exception, expressions of Third Wordlist solidarity often take the opposite tack, purposefully highlighting the commonalities among their colonial experiences. For example, during the final match of the 2021 FIFA Arab Cup, Algerian fans chanted "Filastin *shuhada*" in honor of Palestinian "martyrs." Once the final whistle was blown, players ran onto the pitch carrying both Algerian and Palestinian flags. The Algerian media presented the team's success as a victory not only for the Fennecs (as the national team is called) but also for Palestine. One Algerian sports journalist explained the bond between Algeria and Palestine in terms of the fact that "Algerians understand the devastation of settler colonialism."[17] Algerian cartoonists have also drawn parallels between the continued occupation of the Western Sahara by Morocco and Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories.

Algerians have invoked their own revolutionary legacy to militate for the liberation of Palestine, including during the Hirak, the popular protest movement that began in February 2019. While colonial (and ex-colonial) voices insist on the singularity and exceptionalism of each settler-colonial regime, formerly colonized people embrace the legacy of entanglement and connections to make more radical claims. Depicting settler colonialism as a structure with connections across time and space, rather than an event, continues to be fundamental in fashioning anti-colonial solidarities.

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Endnotes

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[3] Gerson Shafir, *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[4] Liora R. Halperin, *The Oldest Guard : Forging the Zionist Settler Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

[5] ANOM 81F/2302, Documents Algériens, Série Économique, no. 49, July 15, 1948, "La Culture des Agrumes en Algérie."

[6] See Susan Slyomovics, "Who and What is Native to Israel? On Marcel Janco's Settler Art and Jocqueline Shohet Kahanoff's 'Levantinism'," *Settler Colonial Studies* 4/1 (2014).

[7] City of Montclair, *Montclair* (Mount Pleasant, CA: Arcadia Publishing, 2005(, p. 9.

[8] Jared Farmer, *Trees in Paradise: A California History* (New York: W.V. Norton & Company, 2012).

[9] Antoine Bernard de Raymond, "Une 'Algérie Californienne'? L'économie politique de la standardisation dans l'Algérie coloniale (1930-1962)," *Politix* 95 (2011), p. 33.

[10] Ibid.

[11] BNF 8-O2F-1645, École Nationale d'Agriculture d'Alger, "Voyage d'études en Israël de la Promotion 1955-1958," March-April 1958.

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[13] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1/1 (2012).

[14] Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History, Elementary Structures of Race* (London and New York: Verso, 2016).

[15] Ariella Azoulay, "Algerian Jews Have not Forgotten France's Colonial Crimes," Boston Review, February 10, 2021.

[16] Alice Kaplan, "War and Memory in France and Algeria," *New York Review of Books,* November 18, 2021.

[17] Linah Alsaafin and Ramy Allahoum, "What is Behind Algeria and Palestine's Footballing Love Affair?" Aljazeera, December 20, 2021.

How to cite this article:

Muriam Haleh Davis "Settler Entanglements from Citrus Production to Historical Memory," *Middle East Report Online*, April 27, 2022.