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SETTLERS AND THEIR STATES

A Reply to Zeev Sternhell

I AM VERY GRATEFUL to Zeev Sternhell for the seriousness with which he has approached my book, *The Returns of Zionism*, and for the lengthy review essay he has written on it.[1] Sternhell's has long been the most consistent social-democratic Zionist voice in Israel's public life. His *Founding Myths of Israel* is an outstanding critique of the ideology of Labour Zionism in general, and of A. D. Gordon, the Second Aliyah's father figure and ideological mentor, in particular.[2] It delivered an authoritative, scholarly *coup de grâce* to any lingering universalist pretences that Labour Zionism may still have had when Sternhell was writing it. In dozens of *Haaretz* articles, he has indefatigably attacked the post-1967 Occupation and the illegal settlement project in the Occupied Territories, as well as the Israeli manifestation of neoliberal globalization and dismantling of the welfare state. It is testimony to his courage and integrity that, on 24 September 2008, an Israeli settler placed a bomb on the doorstep of his home. Sternhell was injured by the explosion.

But while I have every respect for the depth of feeling that has gone into Sternhell's response to *The Returns of Zionism*, I cannot help wishing he had engaged with the book's actual arguments, above all with regard to alternative modern Jewish nationalisms and to the settler-colonialist nature of the Zionist project. Thus he discusses at length the anti-Semitism of the French Third Republic, and Herzl's response to it, but offers no critique of the other, more progressive and less *völkisch* Jewish nationalisms in Europe at the time—Autonomism, Bundism, or Bernard Lazare's anarcho-revolutionary Judaeo-nationalism—which were not at all colonial. These currents rejected the premise that emancipation

should be conditioned by assimilation—whereas Zionism, whilst reject-ing assimilation, regarded the two as synonymous. These modern Jewish nationalisms were truly secular, for they rejected the Old Testament as a religious text, in stark contrast to Zionism, whose secularity is limited to the rejection of rabbinical Judaism. As Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin has put it, the logic of Zionist Israeli secularity is, 'There is no God, but He promised us the Land.'

Inherent in these modern expressions of Jewish nationalism was the resolution to change the societies within which the Jews existed and to challenge the exclusiveness of the European nation-state. Equally central was the willingness to work with Jews as they actually were, even if this was accompanied by a modernizing confidence in collective and indi-vidual improvement. Zionism, by contrast, shared the hegemonic view of both anti-Semites and progressives like George Eliot that national societies were organic and homogeneous, and therefore the Jews—an extrinsic element in the national body within this logic—should emi-grate, and replicate the same exclusive type of national society in a piece of land deemed 'empty' in the East; this is what Daniel Deronda and Mirah Lapidoth were presumably planning at the end of Eliot's novel. Zionism, moreover, accepted that there was something irremediably wrong with Jews as they actually were—so long as they remained 'in exile'. They needed to be territorialized in order to be normalized.

From the moment Zionism's goal became the resettlement of European Jews in a land controlled by a colonial European power, in order to create a sovereign political entity, it could no longer be understood as 'just' a central or east European nationalism; it was also, inevitably, a white-settler colonialism. For Herzl, this would ultimately 'whiten' the Jews, making them acceptable to white Christians, like the Prussian Junker Kingscourt in *Altneuland*. For Zionists, the framing of European

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[1] Zeev Sternhell, 'In Defence of Liberal Zionism', NLR 62, March–April 2010.
[2] Published in English as *The Founding Myths of Israel: Nationalism, Socialism and the Making of the Jewish State*, Princeton 1998. Sternhell was born in Poland in 1935, and sent to the Ghetto with his family in 1941. He was later smuggled out, and sur-vived the Shoah—in which his mother and sister perished—with the help of false papers. In 1946 he left for France, attending the *lycée* in Avignon, and emigrated to Israel in 1951, where he studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; he wrote his doctoral thesis on Maurice Barrès at Sciences-Po. His work on right-wing ideology includes *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, Princeton 1986; and, newly published in English, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, New Haven 2010.

national societies as exclusively organic was not only acceptable but desirable; they simply thought the Jews should have their own ilk elsewhere. I demonstrate this in micro-historical fashion, bringing to the fore, as *Ansatzpunkt*, the moment of bifurcation between the thought of Herzl, the sovereign settler, and Bernard Lazare, the 'conscious pariah'.[3] Sternhell misses the subtlety of this method entirely, and confuses it with an attempt to excavate beginnings that then unalterably determined the ensuing history of Zionism and Israel/Palestine. What is gained by this type of micro-historical interpretation is the combination of a historicist understanding of the protagonists within the bounds of their context, on the one hand, with the benefit of hindsight that yet does not spoil the story's unfolding.

Settler states

Politically, the most consequential theme is the thorny C-word, colonialism. I am frankly baffled by Sternhell's misrepresentation, or misunderstanding, of my arguments for situating the Zionist project in Palestine and the state of Israel within the framework of comparative settler-colonialism. He attempts to refute them by stating that the Zionist venture in Palestine was not based on the exploitation of native Arab labour and that it did not have 'monopoly of political power'. But the fundamental point about a white-settler colony—New England, Virginia, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina—is that it is predicated on white labour, on complete closure vis-à-vis the natives, on gradual territorial expansion, under the bayonets of a metropole colonial power for as long as necessary; and on the creation of a self-sufficient economy that can attract more settler immigration. Contrary to Sternhell's allegation that this notion is 'dated', a buoyant field of comparative settler colonialism has produced some of the most penetrating new studies of these societies over the past decades. Their starting-point is the recognition that, from the 16th century on, European expansion and conquest produced two related but clearly distinguishable forms of colonialism. One was metropole colonialism, in which the European powers conquered and ruled vast territories, but without the emigration there of Europeans seeking to make these territories their national home: British India is a good example. The other type was settler colonialism, in which conquest

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[3] This method is informed by Carlo Ginzburg's micro-historical work 'Latitude, Slaves and the Bible: An Experiment in Microhistory', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 31, no. 3, Spring 2005, pp. 665–83.

brought with it substantial waves of European settlers who, with the passage of time, sought to make the colony their national patrimony. This process entailed a relationship with the indigenous people that could range from dispossession to elimination, or from slavery—which for the most part did not use the native population—to cheap labour, depending on the economic and social formation of the given settler society.

The achievements of the comparative study of settler colonialisms have been at once scholarly and political. Several of these colonies gave birth to powerful nation-states which have asserted their own hegemonic narratives, nationally and internationally. The comparative field not only questions these narratives, through countervailing evidence and interpretation; it also offers an alternative account of the social formations themselves. In the process, three fundamental features common to these hegemonic settler myths are undermined. The first of these is the putative uniqueness of each settler nation; the second, their privileging of the settlers' intentions, as sovereign subjects, at the expense of the natives' consciousness. Third, the supposed inconsequence of the natives to the form each settler society takes; in other words, the conflict with the natives is not denied, but the fundamental role that this conflict has played in shaping the identity of the settler nation is written out. It is within the typology of settler colonialisms that I place the Zionist colonization of Palestine and the state of Israel—a move which surely should have put to rest the tedious contention that Zionism could not be termed a colonial venture because it lacked the features of metropole colonialism; as if anyone were suggesting otherwise. What its apologists fail to confront is the settler-colonial paradigm.

I am by no means the first to suggest it. The pioneer systematic analysis of Zionist Israel as a settler project was the late Baruch Kimmerling's *Zionism and Territory*, in 1983. At the end of the same decade, Gershon Shafir's magisterial *Land, Labor and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* brought the method of comparative settler colonialism to bear upon the early phase of Zionist colonization, from 1882 to 1914, and later upon the nature of the Israeli state. Shafir demonstrated that, although certain features were historically specific to Zionism, it is perfectly comparable to other settler projects; and that what shaped the nature and institutions of the Jewish colonization of Palestine was not just the project's intrinsic ideologies but the settler–indigenous struggle itself. Shafir underscored the distinction between metropole and settler colonialisms, and helped

to refine the taxonomy of the latter. In particular, he distinguished two types of settler colonies: the 'plantation'—which he adapts to the context of Palestine by calling it the 'ethnic plantation'—and the 'pure settlement colony'. The plantation type prevailed in the initial phase of Zionist settlement in Palestine, known as the First Aliyah (1882–1903), which saw the arrival of some 20,000–30,000 immigrants. Informed by the model of French Algeria and guided by Rothschild's technocrats, it was a social formation in which, from a settler vantage-point, what was needed from the natives was both land and cheap labour. With the arrival of the Second Aliyah (1904–1914), and some 35,000–40,000 immigrants, the crucial passage from plantation to pure settlement occurred, in a process that Shafir meticulously documented and interpreted with great insight:

> The Second Aliyah's revolution against the First Aliyah did not originate from opposition to [settler] colonialism as such but out of frustration with the inability of the ethnic plantation colony to provide sufficient employment for Jewish workers, i.e., from opposition to the particular form of their predecessors' colonization. The Second Aliyah's own method of settlement, and subsequently the dominant Zionist method, was but another type of European overseas colonization—the 'pure settlement colony' also found in Australia, Northern US, and elsewhere. Its threefold aim was control of land, employment that ensured a European standard of living, and massive immigration . . . This form of pure settlement rested on two exclusivist pillars: on the World Zionist Organization's Jewish National Fund and on the . . . Histadrut. The aims of the JNF and the Histadrut were the removal of land and labour from the market, respectively, thus closing them off to Palestinian Arabs.[4]

Colonists and consciousness

Elsewhere in his review, Sternhell remarks—in a statement whose meaning eludes me—that 'Piterberg places himself within a Marxist "superstructure"'. What I actually suggest is that my book may be seen as supplementing Shafir's, by adding an analysis of the superstructure to his penetrating account of the base. Although I do not explicitly mention it in the book, this suggestion is informed by Althusser's—and Perry Anderson's—insistence that the variety of social formations throughout history is the result of a dynamic interaction *between* the base and superstructure, rather than a mechanistic reflection of the former by the latter. I begin from the assumption that if the land–labour

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[4] Gershon Shafir, 'Zionism and Colonialism: A Comparative Approach', in Michael N. Barnett, ed., *Israel in Comparative Perspective*, Albany 1996, p. 235.

formation in Israel has been so palpably typical of settler colonies, there is likely to be a corresponding superstructure. Thus, I demonstrate that the Zionist-Israeli deployment of the Old Testament was not 'Jewish' but Protestant-settler in its history and morphology; and that the mindset of the most important Zionist figures was typically one of white settlers. This was certainly the case for Haim Arlosoroff's explanation in the 1920s of why cooperation between Jewish and Arab workers should be flatly rejected; Arthur Ruppin's theory and practice of settlement in the first decades of the 20th century; and Ben-Gurion's Bible project in the 1950s and early 60s.

Comparative settler colonialism is a *sine qua non* not only for a proper understanding of the past but also of the present perfect. Here the work of the Australian scholar Patrick Wolfe has been pivotal. The originality and insight of Wolfe's writings on this issue lie in his appreciative critique of anti-colonial writers like Amilcar Cabral and Franz Fanon, and later ones like Gayatri Spivak. 'For all the homage paid to heterogeneity and difference', Wolfe observes, 'the bulk of "post"-colonial theorizing is disabled by an oddly monolithic, and surprisingly unexamined, notion of colonialism.' One of the reasons for this, he argues,

> consists in the historical accident (or is it?) that the native founders of the post-colonial canon came from franchise or dependent—as opposed to settler or creole—colonies. This gave these guerrilla theoreticians the advantage of speaking to an oppressed majority, on whose labour a colonizing minority was vulnerably dependent . . . But what if the colonizers are not dependent on native labour?—indeed, what if the natives themselves have been reduced to a small minority whose survival can hardly be seen to furnish the colonizing society with more than a remission from ideological embarrassment?[5]

Wolfe attributes decisive explanatory significance to the fact that—in contrast to the colonial formation that Cabral or Fanon confronted—settler colonies were 'not primarily established to extract surplus value from indigenous labour'. Rather, they were 'premised on displacing indigenes from (or *re*placing them on) the land'. This created a situation in which it was 'difficult to speak of an articulation between colonizer and native since the determinate articulation is not to a society but directly to the land, a precondition of social organization'. The bottom line is a formulation that

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[5] Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*, London and New York 1999, p. 1.

other scholars of settler colonialism understandably cite: 'Settler colonies were (are) premised on the elimination of the native societies. The split tensing reflects a determinate feature of settler colonization. The colonizers come to stay—invasion is a structure not an event.'[6]

Judaizing Galilee

Successful settler colonizations that have become powerful nation-states often continue to 'behave' as if they were still settler projects. Israel is a leading example of this. There are two main threads of continuity between the frontier-colonization phase and that of statehood. The first is the continuing process of acquiring portions of land and expelling the Palestinians, or enclosing them in decreasing, isolated spaces. The second is the ongoing buttressing—through laws, institutions or coercive mechanisms—of what can be termed settler-supremacy, or in this case, Judaeo-supremacy. Thus substantial continuities can be discerned in settlement patterns from the early stages of Zionist colonization, through what the Israeli geographer Oren Yiftachel terms 'internal frontier settlement' within the Green Line, to the projects in the post-1967 Occupied Territories, or what another geographer, Elisha Efrat, has called 'the geography of occupation'.

An example can be taken from the Galilee region, where ethnic cleansing in 1948 was less comprehensive than in other parts of the country. Ben-Gurion characteristically noted in the mid-1950s that, while the Negev Desert was literally empty, the Galilee was empty in the sense of being empty of Jews. This engendered the state project known as the Judaization of the Galilee, launched in the 1970s. *Mutatis mutandis*, its basic purpose was reminiscent of the late 19th-century German internal-colonization project in eastern Prussia which had crucially informed Arthur Ruppin and Franz Oppenheimer seven decades earlier: to transform the demographic structure of the area by settling Jews and, where possible, removing Arabs; and to circumscribe the growth of Arab communities by creating contiguous blocs of Jewish settlement around them, thus isolating Palestinian towns and villages from one another.

Oren Yiftachel's work on internal colonization projects is especially instructive. Of particular relevance is his study of the *mitzpim* (outlooks),

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[6] Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, p. 2.

the chief forms of settlement since the late 1970s. His framework here is that of the settler state which deploys still-viable early Zionist institutions—most notably, the Jewish National Fund—as well as newer ones, to colonize what he calls the internal frontier. The *mitzpim* are, in a sense, a suburban version of the *kibbutzim*: they consist almost entirely of middle-class Ashkenazi Jews and have found various ways—sanctioned by the state—to exclude Mizrahi Jews, not to mention Palestinian Arabs. Needless to say, they offer a high quality of life in terms of services and environment. Yiftachel summarizes the function of settlement policies in the Galilee as being 'to bisect Arab regional territoriality, reduce Arab landholding, and neglect Arab villages in most matters of state-induced development and infrastructure'.[7]

In this context, the post-1967 Occupation has given rise to a curious situation: what began as a settler project and became a settler state has since acquired colonies which, in their turn, have created a further settler project. The patterns of the settlements in the Occupied Territories have much in common with previous phases of pre-state colonization and with state colonization inside the Green Line. The purpose has always been to create contiguous Jewish territorial blocs, to remove as many Palestinians as possible from the land, and as much land as possible from the Palestinians. In his *Geography of Occupation*, Elisha Efrat offers fascinating observations on the continuities of the settler structures, even after statehood has been achieved:

> The small settlement of the outposts originated from the pioneering settlement, *à la* 'wall and stockade' [*homa u-migdal* of the 1930s and 40s]; the bloc model repeated the regional concept implemented in the Tel Mond Bloc, Emeq Hefer and Emeq Zevulun; the regional model essentially rehearsed the settlement in the districts of Lakhish and Besor, and the Jerusalem Corridor; the adjacent urban model drew on the experiment of Upper Nazareth; the township model took advantage of the cumulative experience of settling immigrants in the development towns; and finally the communal settlement was created to meet the needs of rural settlement devoid of land and agricultural means of production.[8]

Like every settler society, Israel has its own historical specificities. The Shoah, as a catastrophic event and a lingering phenomenon, is an obvious example. Two other—related—features are distinctly Zionist-Israeli.

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[7] Oren Yiftachel, 'Nation Building or Ethnic Fragmentation?', *Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies Working Paper*, November 1996, p. xiv.
[8] Elisha Efrat, *Geografia shel kibush* [Geography of Occupation], Jerusalem 2002.

The first is that, as a settler ideology, it denies the original nativeness of the natives in a way that even more eliminatory instances, such as in Argentina, the US and Australia, do not. The second is that this is ultimately an unresolved settler situation, which entails various paradoxes. On the one hand, the native Palestinians' presence plays a much more substantial political role than, say, the Native Americans in the US or the Aboriginals in Australia. On the other hand, the asymmetry of power between the settler state and the indigenes has grown exponentially. This paradox is volatile, because—frustratingly, from its vantage-point—the settler state can neither translate this yawning power discrepancy into the irrevocable removal of the natives, nor resign itself to their presence as equal human beings, individually and collectively.

Outcomes

Sternhell concludes by describing my book as 'a polemic'. It is well known, of course, that critical works about Zionism or Israel are 'polemical' (or worse), whereas favourable ones are scholarly; readers will judge for themselves. But his charge that my views are tantamount to a wish for Israel's disappearance requires rebuttal. I am vehemently opposed to any position that seeks the violent destruction of Israel which, in terms of its foundation, is neither more nor less legitimate than other settler states like the US, Canada, Argentina or Australia. What I would argue for is the de-Zionization of the single state that has now *de facto* existed between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean for 43 years—more than twice the duration of Israel within the Green Line—so that it may become a modern state based on something resembling universal suffrage, rather than one predicated upon Judaeo-supremacy.

Sternhell belongs to a socio-political formation that is now on the verge of extinction, namely, the Zionist-Israeli liberal left. It supported the Oslo Accords and continues to believe in the two-state solution, not only as a viable political arrangement but also as vindication of the Zionist project and of the state of Israel. In its self-view, as well as the way it has been treated by Jewish Israeli society, this current was dealt a severe blow in the wake of Camp David in 2000. It experienced a rude awakening and was 'disappointed' by Arafat and the Palestinians in general. It is reasonable to speculate that, had Camp David yielded similar results but under a Likud government, liberal Israelis would not have been so disappointed; Ehud Barak, however, is 'one of us' and therefore trustworthy. Since

2000 and later the al-Aqsa Intifada, two versions of this liberal Zionist-Israeli camp have emerged. One version, aggressive and extremely racist, is faithfully represented by the historian Benny Morris and the *Haaretz* columnist Ari Shavit. The other version, whose notable voices are Sternhell and Tom Segev, though it denounces Palestinian resistance as terrorism, has remained consistent in its comprehensive opposition to the Occupation and the settlement project, and in its adherence to (more or less) the Green Line as Israel's final border.

Given the 'realities on the ground',[9] Sternhell's hope that Israel, as a Zionist state, may one day roll itself back—or be rolled back—to its pre-67 existence is completely untenable. Indeed, the reason Sternhell is so incensed by *The Returns of Zionism* lies in his basic decency and honesty. He knows that his dream of a social-democratic Israel within the Green Line borders has been all but shattered and that the Occupation is there to stay for the foreseeable future. More fundamentally, he knows that Zionist Israel is simply irreconcilable with the notion of any remotely equal citizenship for all who are included within it, regardless of whether this is the inevitable culmination of the Zionist project or the nightmarish result of a decent hope gone terribly astray. He knows that with every day that passes, Israel—within and without the Green Line—is becoming more aggressive, more oppressive, more hell-bent on pushing Judaeo-supremacy to unprecedented levels. Sternhell, most crucially, is as familiar as I am with S. Yizhar's memorable line in his 1948 novella *Khirbet Khizeh*: 'We came, we shot, we burned; we blew up, expelled, drove out, and sent into exile.' It is painful enough for an individual as decent as Sternhell to confine the absorption of this line to 1948; the realization of its prophetic extent, as a synecdoche for what Israel would become, is surely intolerable.

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[9] As analysed by, for instance, the former Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, Meron Benvenisti: 'The Inevitable Bi-national Regime', *Haaretz*, 27 January 2010.