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### The evolution of historical redescription in Israel and Australia: The question of the 'founding violence'

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# The Evolution of Historical Redescription in Israel and Australia

## The Question of the 'Founding Violence'

LORENZO VERACINI

*This article compares two processes of historiographical redescription. Two themes appear central to each: the final acknowledgement of the dispossession of the Indigenous inhabitants—what can be defined as the 'founding violence'—and the defective nature of the legitimacy of the institutions of the state until a settlement with the dispossessed is finally reached. The 'founding violence' emerges in both cases as a crucial site for the production and reproduction of historical and historiographical discourses—a contested ground in the process of redefinition of national identity.*

### Historical revisionisms and deadlocked 'reconciliations'<sup>1</sup>

**THIS ARTICLE IS** an exercise in comparative historiography and deals with two processes of historiographical redescription in Israel and Australia.<sup>2</sup> Although the historical experiences these debates refer to and the social and political environments in which they have developed clearly have few common features, they share some characteristics. Among these similarities are a common past as a British colony and the apparent standstill in the respective processes of 'peace' and 'reconciliation'—whose irreversibility had been solemnly proclaimed in both cases more than a decade ago, yet remains unfulfilled. Also characterising both debates is the obvious incapacity of coming to terms with a history epitomised by extreme violence and denial. In both countries, the deadlock in the reconciliation process has been brought about—among several other factors—by the hegemony exercised by a right wing electoral majority that finds expression in a government that clings anxiously and nostalgically to an ideology strongly related to colonial

<sup>1</sup> The term 'revisionism' in relation to Israeli matters has a somewhat confusing meaning. While it is sometimes used to refer to historical readings that depart from conventional patterns of interpretation, it is also commonly used to indicate the political tradition of the Zionist right. For an analysis of the use of 'revisionism' in the Israeli context, see, for example, A. Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (London: Penguin, 2000), 11–16.

<sup>2</sup> This article is based on the historical literature published in English, French and Italian languages. However, while the lack of reference to sources in the Hebrew (or Arabic) language is an obvious disadvantage, most contributions, especially those likely to be read by an intellectual public particularly interested in the ongoing Arab–Israeli conflict, are immediately translated into English (or French).

and colonising practices.<sup>3</sup> While governments in both Israel and Australia—and, albeit to a lesser extent, their left wing opponents—are sincerely convinced that they are proposing generous offers to their Palestinian and Aboriginal counterparts, the prospect of a final status settlement (the possibility of a ‘treaty’ in one case, a final peace agreement in the other) are continuously postponed. As a result, in both cases, despite ‘practical consideration’ and the ‘roadmap’, a final resolution to the conflict tends to fade into an indefinite future. The only progress in both these appeasement processes remains the possibility that the ruling government may—however carefully—word a statement conveying some sense of regret for past injustices. This statement would not commit the issuing authority to a financial compensation for past practices.<sup>4</sup>

Although not entirely new, the choice of the test cases for this comparison may appear somewhat perplexing.<sup>5</sup> On the Israeli side, this would generally be a result of an approach stressing the impossibility of comparative approaches involving Jewish history. The suggestion that the Israeli experience in relation to the Palestinian people—a ‘nation within’, if one considers the consistent minority of Palestinians endowed with Israeli citizenship, and a nation under colonial rule, if the population of the Occupied Territories is considered—could be contextualised in the background of other colonial enterprises of settlement clashes with Zionist versions of ‘manifest destiny’.<sup>6</sup> On the Australian side, the reference to ‘founding violence’ and the comparison with the overblown brutality that characterises the historical evolution of Israel/Palestine would also appear controversial. The last remnants of the Australian mythology of the

<sup>3</sup> The question of national/Indigenous reconciliation—or the lack of it, or the unconvincing attempt at it—is a recurrent feature of colonial/postcolonial nations, from South Africa to New Zealand. The Mexican debate over the ‘ley indígena’ (the ‘Indigenous law’), a debate that has seen the EZLN rallying in the heart of Mexico City in 2001, is yet another example of a national reconciliation process dealing with the constraints brought about by a right wing electoral majority.

<sup>4</sup> During the Taba talks in January 2001 the Barak government proposed to express regret for the situation of the Palestinian refugees: ‘Israel recognizes its moral and legal responsibility for the forced displacement and dispossession of the Palestinian civilian population during the 1948 war and for preventing the refugees from returning to their homes ...’ For the full text of the Taba declaration, a document that the Israel delegation prepared (knowing, however, that the incumbent Sharon government would not recognise it as binding), see <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/cahier/proche-orient/refugeespalest-en>. Not surprisingly, Palestinian responses to the same declaration were using a different tone: ‘The State of Israel solemnly expresses its sorrow for the tragedy of the Palestinian refugees, their suffering and losses, and will be an active partner in ending this terrible chapter that was opened 53 years ago ...’

<sup>5</sup> For example, previous attention to the similarities between the colonisation of Palestine and Australia can be detected in John Docker, ‘Jews in Australia’, *Arena* 96 (1991): 146–54. This article proposes a comparison that is consistent with the choice made by D. Stasiulis, and N. Yuval-Davis in *Unsettling Settler Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> During the 1970s, eminent Mideast scholar Maxime Rodinson had published an exhaustive pamphlet analysing Israel’s historical development as ‘colonial-settler state’. My analysis departs from this assumption and from Rodinson’s accurate refutation of each argumentation proposing Israel as intrinsically alien from colonial practice. See Maxime Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial Settler State?* (New York: Monad Press, 1973).

'quiet frontier' discourage a comparison with a situation characterised by such hostility. As well as attachment to notions of 'pacific settlement', the very acknowledgement of violence to such a pervasive degree would suggest political and legislative action to compensate the Indigenous population. However, despite such objections, the similarities between the two processes of reappraisal and the debates that surrounded them—one could call them the 'history wars' of Israel and Australia—do warrant a comparative approach.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most important shared trait emerging from the comparison of these historiographical revisionisms is that, despite the deadlock in the evolution of the reconciliation/peace processes, the academic community of both, or at least important sections of them, has repeatedly promoted notions significantly distant from both the political agendas of governments and from the public debate. The example of Israeli historian Ilan Pappé is instructive: not only did his work proactively challenge the historical revisionism of previous decades, his political activity and commitment is also direct and he is member of the peace organisation Hadash.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Henry Reynolds' role in the 1992 'Mabo' decision by the High Court of Australia has been repeatedly highlighted and, from some sections of academic opinion, bitterly criticised.<sup>9</sup> In both cases, many historians have repeatedly proposed interpretations departing dramatically from the orthodoxies entertained by both the majority of the population and their political representatives.

For different reasons and certainly to a different degree, both countries have witnessed a marked reluctance by the public in accepting some of the conclusions the 'new historians' were proposing, especially when the 'founding violence' was involved. Master narratives are rarely replaced without a fight. The very use of the term 'genocide' has inevitably been responded to with scandalised and apologetic reactions.<sup>10</sup> Such parallels may be explained by the fact that in both cases

<sup>7</sup> See Bain Attwood, 'A Tour of Duty in Australia's History Wars', *Australian Financial Review*, 1 June 2001. It should be noted that Israel has also witnessed, albeit on a reduced scale, a local version of the 'stolen generations' debate. It is still unclear, forty years later, what happened to the children of Yemenite Jews who, when their parents were officially declared dead, were adopted by assimilating families of Western Jews in accordance to a program of racial cleansing of Oriental Jews. See, D. Vidal, J. Algazy, 'Il mosaico di Israele si scompone', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Italian Edition), May 1999.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed analysis of Israeli 'new historians' see D. Vidal, *Le Pêché originel d'Israël. L'expulsion des Palestiniens revisitée par les 'nouveaux historiens' israéliens* (Paris: Atelier, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> See for example Geoffrey Partington, *The Australian History of Henry Reynolds* (Adelaide: AMEC, 1994). On the other hand, Reynolds himself has noted that the History Department at James Cook University has played a crucial role 'in the fundamental reinterpretation of Australia's past which found expression in the Mabo decision'. See Henry Reynolds, 'Introduction', in *Race Relations in North Queensland*, ed. Henry Reynolds (Townsville: James Cook University, 1978), 3.

<sup>10</sup> See the *Quadrant* 'campaign' attacking the 'new' Australian history (and particularly Henry Reynolds), especially a series of negationist articles by Keith Windschuttle, 'The Break-Up of Australia', *Quadrant*, September 2000, October 2000, November 2000 and Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume 1: Van Diemen's Land* (Sydney: Macleay Press, 2002). See also Henry Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain? The Question of Genocide in Australia's History* (Melbourne: Viking/Penguin, 2001).

historical inquiry into the violence on the 'frontier' brings into question the very foundations of the state and entails a reappraisal of the founding myths that support most orthodox narratives.<sup>11</sup>

Although the question of refugees (as well as the question of the status of Jerusalem) are obviously alien to the Australian debate, the polemic over the 'black armband' interpretation of history is reproduced in a surprisingly similar fashion by Israeli academics at odds with established interpretative patterns. It is not, as will be argued, merely a question wrought by a generation of historians working on the foundations of the state and on the settler/Indigenous relationship in two different contexts: the very dynamics of the processes of historiographical redescription are reproduced in a similar way. The debates that surrounded these processes also resonate to a surprising degree.

While it is apparent that the peace process initiated at Oslo has collapsed irreversibly, this article assumes that both the native title legislation and the 'reconciliation process' in Australia have also failed to address the ultimate nature of Aboriginal dispossession. Aboriginal communities have had little, if any, access to their lands and have been forced to allocate important resources to have their native title considered. Even the more reductive approach to 'practical reconciliation' has not delivered visible results. These are well known facts; nonetheless, it remains important to highlight them.<sup>12</sup>

This article draws a parallel between the two historiographical contexts and endeavours to explain the cause of such similarities. Moreover, I am offering a new perspective on Australian historiography, as Australian history is rarely positioned in relation to violence, historical orthodoxies and reconciliation. I will argue that these failures are grounded in political unwillingness to face the 'founding violence' of these societies, and in the incapacity of renovated historical narratives for commanding public opinion. The colonial imagination of these publics has proven resilient to the attacks of the 'new histories'.

<sup>11</sup> For the Australian case, see Klaus Neumann, Nicholas Thomas, and Hilary Ericksen, eds., *Quicksands: Foundational Histories in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1999). For the Israeli case, see G. Piterberg, 'Erasures', *New Left Review* 10 (2001).

<sup>12</sup> This article does not, however, imply a moral equivalence between the two cases. As Tim Rowse suggested in a comment to an early draft of this paper, it is important to note that since 1966, Australian governments have transferred title over eighteen per cent of the Australian land mass to Indigenous Australians and it is plausible that this quantity will grow. As well, in Australia there is a debate about the price that Indigenous people have paid in being colonised, and the 'price' of reparations. In this respect, the turning point is *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). This became the voice of a different Indigenous constituency of suffering—not so much the dispossessed, but the psychologically and spiritually shattered. The task is to account for the horrendous consequences of ostensibly helpful actions of 'protection', 'uplift', 'welfare' etc. There is no Israeli equivalent for this debate. See, [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/stolen\\_children/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/stolen_children/index.html)

## The 'New Israeli History'

Until two decades ago a systematic historiography on the origins of the State of Israel did not exist.<sup>13</sup> The very organisation of the Israeli cultural establishment prevented autonomous and alternative historical research. Historical contributions and interpretations were published in a very ideologised context, in a situation in which the Mapai, the Zionist social democratic party, in power continuously between 1948 and 1977, hegemonised the intellectual debate thanks to a system of rigid control over historical research—a control exercised through a close network of publishing houses, research institutes, kibbutz and unionist organisations. Other contributions with some historical content came from left wing Zionist parties, but—apart from the even more pronounced ideological conceptions they displayed—the interpretative orthodoxy remained unchallenged: on the one hand, Palestinians were not acknowledged, but were subsumed within the larger issue of Israel's relationship with the Arab world while losing their historical autonomy, presence and legitimacy. On the other hand—and as a consequence of this non-recognition—the history of the violent dispossession and expulsion of the Palestinian population that followed the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948–49 was subsumed under the history of the military campaigns Israel conducted against the Arab armies.<sup>14</sup>

The Palestinian presence was denied, the history of Palestine prior to the Israeli–Arab conflict degraded, accounts of their dispossession systematically disregarded, a far cry from the intense debate of the 1990s.<sup>15</sup> The first important moment of challenge to this master narrative was the publication of Yehoshua Porath's *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement* in 1974.<sup>16</sup> The book explored the early phase of the Palestinian nationalist movement and argued for a comprehensive shift in the interpretation of its origins. By emphasising the existence of such a movement in a period (the 1920s) in which the political presence of the Palestinians was typically denied, Porath was according Palestinian nationalists a history independent from both the Arab world and the State of Israel. In this work, Palestinians were accorded an autonomous political and historical development. This precursor work was, however, published in

<sup>13</sup> See J. Halevi, 'La violenza fondatrice', *La Rivista del Manifesto* 13 (January 2001). *La Rivista del Manifesto* is an Italian journal of geopolitics with a marked left-wing character. Its articles are sometimes translated into English. See <http://www.larivistadelmanifesto.it/> It should be noted that this section does not deal with the historiographical production of Palestinian authors but only comments on the Israeli debate. For an important contribution to this debate by a Palestinian Scholar, see N. Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of 'Transfer' in Zionist Political Thought, 1882–1948* (Washington DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of the relation between colonising Zionism and Marxist and nationalistic inspiration, see Zeev Sternhell, *Aux origines d'Israël* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell has defined this period and the debates that characterised it as a 'lay revolution for Zionism'. See Zeev Sternhell, 'Rivoluzione laica per il Sionismo', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Italian Edition), May 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Y. Porath, *The Emergence of the Palestinian-Arab National Movement: 1918–1929* (London: Cass, 1974).

a context of rigid orthodoxy; despite its groundbreaking character, the Israeli historical debate during the 1970s remained substantially constrained within the limits of an unyielding orthodoxy.

Paradoxically, the event that 'freed' historical inquiry from the intellectual control exercised by the Zionist left was Begin's electoral victory in 1977. While the right never developed the network that had assured the hegemony of left-wing Zionism in previous decades, many liberal intellectuals started proposing interpretations and themes that would have been unthinkable in the intellectual climate of previous decades.<sup>17</sup>

Since then the Israeli revisionism has proceeded mainly along three lines. One considered the problem of Palestinian refugees, a forgotten people by definition, whose fight for survival and acknowledgement has included a fight for the recognition of their historical experience.<sup>18</sup> Benny Morris' works, for example, have been essential in placing this problem on the intellectual public agenda since the early 1980s.<sup>19</sup> While until then Palestinian refugees had been erased from the historical record (as well as removed from the land), this new interpretative trend managed to recover their experience and to propose it to the Israeli public. It should be said, though, that—possibly as a result of the same process of exclusion from the official historical record these historians have addressed—refugees have always managed to preserve a collective and oral tradition of the 'nakba' ('disaster' or 'catastrophe'—the expulsion from their land and homes) of 1948 that has survived exceptionally intact.<sup>20</sup> Morris, using archival material, documented the deportation of Palestinian people during and in the aftermath of the 1948 conflict. They faced the 'Deir Yassin' effect—Deir Yassin was a Palestinian village massacred by right wing militias and came to represent a blueprint for Palestinian deportation/depopulation—using evidence that had remained unexplored for decades. The accuracy and quantity of the material

<sup>17</sup> A good discussion of this theme is contained in Israel Shahak's 'The Struggle against Military Censorship and the Quality of the Army', in *Open Secrets: Israeli Foreign and Nuclear Policies*, ed. I. Shahak (London: Pluto Press, 1997).

<sup>18</sup> For brief and thoughtful analyses of the historical experience of Palestinian refugees see J.M. Peteet, 'Lebanon: Palestinian Refugees in the Post-war Period', Human Rights Commission Report—December 1997, available online, <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/cahier/proche-orient/region-lebanon-refugee/>; and R. Sayigh, 'Profughi anche in patria', *La Rivista del Manifesto* (October 2000). This article was also presented at a roundtable discussion titled 'Palestinian Communities Under Siege: A Focus on the Bedouin, Palestinians inside Israel and Refugees'. For more extended analyses, see R. Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon* (London: Zed Press, 1994); and N. Aruri, ed., *Palestinian Refugees: The Right of Return* (London: Pluto Press, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) and *1948 and After: Israel and the Palestinians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> For a sophisticated analysis of the mechanisms of remembrance in the Palestinian camp and, conversely, the strategies developed and deployed by the Israeli state in order to terminate the historical memory of the Palestinian people, see Piterberg, 'Erasures'. This article deals, in particular, with the conceptual removal of Palestinians during and after their physical transfer—a theme that undoubtedly recalls many of the issues relating to the Stolen Generations in Australia.

presented and the detailed analysis of whether each Palestinian village had been deserted as a result of military operations or as a consequence of intimidation make Morris' analysis an invaluable tool for the comprehension of the refugee problem. Yet, despite the frank description of Israeli atrocities against the Palestinian population (from terrorism and robbery to outright expulsion of civilians), Morris has been criticised for not accepting that there was a predetermined plan for the expulsion of the Palestinian population.<sup>21</sup> In a following work, Morris has also raised the question of Palestinian 'infiltration' (the other side of deportation) and showed how most of these incidents were disguised attempts to rejoin families, recuperate belongings, complete harvests. The Israeli leadership utilised this spontaneous movement of displaced peoples who had lost everything for a campaign to destabilise neighbouring Arab nations and complete the conquest of historic Palestine.<sup>22</sup>

A second area of revisionist activity has been the analysis of Israeli dealings with Arab countries and the role of imperialist powers in the development of these relationships. While this aspect of historical research is not directly connected with the settler/Indigenous relationship, these works challenged the orthodox understanding of Israel as an entity constantly surrounded by an undifferentiated multiplicity of hostile states. The theme of collaboration and collusion was crucial in producing an interpretation that distinguished between different agendas and at the same time managed to locate Israeli action in the context of the Arab world. The rigorous separation between the two entities—between Arab world and the Yishuv (the community of Jews in Palestine before the establishment of the independent state of Israel) and Israel—was in this way overturned and one tenet of the historical orthodoxy challenged: there had been a multiplicity of responses to Israeli power and presence. One of the results of this line of research was that the specificity of Palestinian actions was highlighted against a backdrop of individual interests pursued by each Arab power. Avi Shlaim's work on the unspoken alliance between Israel and King Abdallah of Jordan is an example of this tendency.<sup>23</sup>

A third matter of revisionist activity has been the progressive exposure of Zionist activity in relation to Nazi persecutions. Tom Segev's *The Seventh Million* illustrated the collusions between Nazi authorities during the 1930s and exponents of Zionist organisations.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, his work on the political use of

<sup>21</sup> Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians*. Masalha's book insists on the Zionist conceptualisation of population transfer as a paradigm for the founding of the Israeli state and proposes an interpretation that is partially consistent with Morris': there was no need for a plan because the very foundation of Israel was the plan. The deportations of Palestinians was organised and carried out in a piecemeal fashion and with the least publicity possible. The question of whether a plan for Palestinian deportation had been executed becomes, therefore, much less relevant.

<sup>22</sup> See Benny Morris, *Israel's Border Wars 1949–1956: Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation, and the Countdown to the Suez War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> See A. Shlaim, *Collusion Across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement and the Partition of Palestine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

<sup>24</sup> See Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993).



Eichmann's process in 1961 insists on the 'educational' nature of the enterprise, on the conscious attempt by the Israeli leadership to incorporate the Shoah—the holocaust of European Jewry—within the ideological framework of the state of Israel. While largely successful, this attempt shows how consistent parts of Israeli history and society had not been part of that tragedy.<sup>25</sup> This notion contributed to the creation of a rupture in the history of Jews, a fissure especially crucial because of one of the 'founding myths' of Israel's society—the notion that the Yushuv/Israel was (and had always been) the state of every Jew.

Zeev Sternhell's *Aux origines d'Israel*, while also concerned with the political priorities of the leadership of the Yushuv, clearly linked the emergence of Zionism in Palestine with the influence exercised by both Stalin's Russia and National Socialist Germany.<sup>26</sup> His definition of the Zionist project as a type of nationalist socialism represented the climax of this process of revision and concluded the process of historical inquiry into the origins of the State of Israel. It is worth quoting from Sternhell's introduction a passage that sets out his assumptions and inscribes the historical experience of Zionism (and of Israel) in the long twentieth-century tradition of proto-fascist movements (of which, in any case, he is one of the most eminent historians):

I contend that the inability of the Labor movement under the leadership of its founders and immediate successors to curb aspirations to territorial expansion, as well as its failure to build a more egalitarian society, was not due to any objective conditions or circumstances beyond its control. These developments were the result of a conscious ideological choice made at the beginning and clearly expressed in the doctrine of 'constructive socialism'. Constructive socialism is generally regarded as the Labor movement's great social and ideological achievement, a unique and original product, the outstanding expression of the special needs and conditions of the country. But in reality, far from being unique, constructive socialism was merely an Eretz Israeli version of nationalist socialism.<sup>27</sup>

This claim was obviously received with extreme anxiety in Israel. Not only was the established notion of the irreducible uniqueness of Jewish history here put seriously to the test by a comparative reference to other political experiences of Europe's twentieth century, the authoritative and well argued allusion to nationalist socialism as an interpretative framework for the understanding of Israeli society ultimately challenged the very notion of Israel as merely a response to Jewish persecutions in Europe.

Each of these streams of historiographical activity insisted on the violent and discriminatory character of Israeli history, a violence (and an exclusion) that was not only exercised in the recognised conflicts with its Arab neighbours but was mainly put into effect against an Indigenous population whose existence,

<sup>25</sup> See Tom Segev, 'Nel 1961, la svolta del processo Eichmann', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Italian edition), April 2001. See also Tom Segev, *C'était en Palestine au temps des coquelicots* (Paris: Levi, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Zeev Sternhell, *The Founding Myths of Israel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

until the intellectual shifts that began in the 1980s, had not even been acknowledged. It should be noted here that the historical orthodoxy of the Zionist left had always rejected the idea that violence had been the fundamental feature of the Israeli experience and had always insisted either on the relative 'emptiness' of the Zionist frontier or on the legality of the acquisition of land for Zionist use and settlement.<sup>28</sup> Also, in this context, it should be emphasised that the process of historical revisionism is still in its very early stages and that, while most 'new historians' have recently argued for notions that Palestinian scholars had already put forward, school textbooks and educational curricula still don't write in full the historical experience of Palestinians.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, as stressed by Dominique Vidal in a book dedicated to the new Israeli history, the greatest merit of this generation of historians has been to liberate the Zionist ideology from the constraints of a single ideological orthodoxy.<sup>30</sup> In the words of Sternhell, the net result of this process has been that:

the historiographical and sociological debate in Israel in recent years has assumed unprecedented proportions. A distance of some fifty years was needed to examine the relationship of the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) to the holocaust, the War of Independence, the creation of the problem of Arab refugees, or the social differences in Jewish Palestine with sufficient detachment. These subjects still carry a heavy emotional charge, but they are no longer taboo. Israel is growing up and learning to look at itself and its past.<sup>31</sup>

As we have seen, the most contested ground remains the period between 1947 and 1949, quite literally the foundation and consolidation of the State of Israel and its (unilateral) legitimacy *vis à vis* the Palestinian 'Nakba'. In other terms, and in words resonating with the Australian debate, the historical debate needed to address the moment of Indigenous dispossession, the founding violence of a settler society.

<sup>28</sup> Baruch Kimmerling, for example, defined the settler frontier in Palestine as a case of 'low front-ierity'. According to him the most significant factor in determining settler-Indigenous relations is population density, with a high density of Indigenous population preventing frontier-like conditions and unchecked dispossession. See Baruch Kimmerling, *Zionism and Territory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>29</sup> See Edward Said's comment in his 'Cinquant'anni dopo la nascita dello stato di Israele la Palestina non è scomparsa', *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Italian edition), May 1998.

<sup>30</sup> See Dominique Vidal, *Le Pêché originel d'Israël. L'expulsion des Palestiniens revisité par les 'nouveaux historiens' israéliens* (Paris: Atelier, 1998). Another review of these issues is contained in Gulie Ne'eman Arad, ed., *Israeli Historiography Revisited* special issue of *History and Memory* 7, no. 1 (1995), especially Anita Shapira's article: 'Politics and Collective Memory: The Debate over the "New Historians" in Israel'.

<sup>31</sup> Sternhell, *The Founding Myths of Israel*, x.

## Aboriginal history

Until three decades ago a systematic historiography on the experience of Aboriginal people did not exist. Since then, the evolution of the discourses of Aboriginal history has also proceeded along three lines while dealing with similar themes: the discovery of violence, the incorporation of Aboriginal history in the wider context of mainstream Australian historiography, and the discovery of Aboriginal collaboration with the pastoral industry. Eventually, the 'new Australian history' has brought about the denunciation of the genocidal practices that have characterised Aboriginal treatment and policies since the very beginning of the European invasion.<sup>32</sup>

During the 1970s, following W.E.H. Stanner's famous condemnation of the 'great Australian silence', Australia witnessed the establishment of 'Aboriginal history' as an academic discipline. What had previously been considered the uncontested domain of anthropologists, ethnologists and archaeologists became an interest of historians too.<sup>33</sup> However, there have been formidable obstacles to the reception of the interpretation proposed by historians, and such a reframed understanding of Australia's past faced widespread public reluctance. The myth of 'Aboriginal privilege' has retained its appeal and so has the idea that Australia had been comprehensively and peacefully settled. As a result, the notion that Aboriginal people have endured a non-violent process of dispossession is still collectively upheld by wide sectors of the public opinion and remains appealing to strong segments of the political and business communities.

During this early historiographical phase, the main interpretative tendency was to highlight European brutality and insist on Indigenous insubordination. This 'ideological' necessity produced a historiography that often romanticised Aboriginal martyrs while overlooking Aboriginal agency and objectives.<sup>34</sup> However, the Penguin edition of *The Other Side of the Frontier* had an immense success and can be seen as concluding the first phase of historical re-writing on the subject of Aboriginal history: the 'great Australian silence' had been broken

<sup>32</sup> For a narrative of the evolution of the historiographical discourse in the Australian context, see Lorenzo Veracini, 'Negotiating Indigenous Resistance in the South Pacific: Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Kanaky-New Caledonia, Three Cases in Historical Redescription' (PhD thesis, Griffith University, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> See the seminal series of Boyer lectures delivered by W.E.H. Stanner, *After The Dreaming* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1968). For an excellent review of images of 'Aboriginality', both in the European and the Australian discourses from the early phase of contact to the 1920s, see the still unsurpassed article written in the early 1960s by archaeologist D.J. Mulvaney, 'The Australian Aborigines, 1606–1929: Opinion and Fieldwork', Parts 1 and 2, in *Historical Studies: Selected Articles*, eds J.J. Eastwood and F.B. Smith, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964), 1–56.

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, F. Robinson and B. York, *The Black Resistance: An Introduction to the History of the Aborigines' Struggle Against British Colonialism* (Melbourne: Widescope International, 1977); and B. Elder, *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians Since 1788* (Sydney: New Holland Publishers, 1988).

for good.<sup>35</sup> The book provided a solid interpretation of Aboriginal resistance and a paradigmatic model of race relations on the Australian frontier. It could be seen as authoritatively summarising a decade of intense research on the subject of Aboriginal resistance to European expansion. Most of all, in its attempt to provide an Aboriginal view of the process—the ‘other side’, the side that had been so extensively neglected in previous historical reconstructions of the conflict—it symbolically concluded the process of incorporation of the Aboriginal experience into the ‘mainstream’ history of nineteenth-century Australia.

Throughout the following decade, the interpretation of colonial relations, encounters and conflicts in Australia acquired a marked degree of sophistication and articulation. This line of interpretation, as we shall see, stressed the voluntary nature of Aboriginal involvement in both the European world and economic activities.<sup>36</sup> It was not denied that violence and conflict had occurred. However, the new interpretations that were put forward tended to ascribe these issues a significance that was structurally different from previous ‘catastrophic’ interpretations. Violence played the key role in this interpretative approach. In the historiographical tradition established during the 1970s, violence was the constitutive element of the Australian frontier, its quintessential nature; in that of the 1980s, it was reduced to a ‘byproduct’ of unequal relations. Colonial relations, so it was increasingly argued, developed as a result of consensual and consciously made choices; they were not merely the result of a brutal imposition of violent dispossession.<sup>37</sup>

However, a major turning point in the historical debate and in the public perception of the issues at stake was not to come from a history book: it was the High Court of Australia in 1992 that released the historic ‘Mabo’ judgement and gave juridical recognition to the historiographical transformation that had made violent dispossession a central theme of Australian history. The ‘new Australian history’ was brought out of the seminar room and into public policy, and so into collision with consistent parts of the public opinion. The direct connection between this ‘revolutionary’ decision and the nature of the historical debate that followed was perceptively described few years later by Bain Attwood, who stated:

Mabo and the new Australian history ends the historical silence about the Aboriginal precolonial and colonial past upon which the conservative invention of Australia and Australianness was founded, and since their [the conservatives] Australia was realised

<sup>35</sup> See Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1982).

<sup>36</sup> See, among many other sources, Richard Broome’s sophisticated analysis in ‘Aboriginal Victims and Voyagers, Confronting Frontier Myths’, *Journal of Australian Studies* 42 (1994).

<sup>37</sup> For examples of this interpretative trend, see Dawn May, *Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry: Queensland from White Settlement to Present* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Ann McGrath, *‘Born in the Cattle’: Aborigines in Cattle Country* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

through and rests upon that conventional historical narrative, the end of this history constitutes for them the end of Australia.<sup>38</sup>

The decision itself had a huge impact on the official and popular self-image of Australia: *terra nullius*, the notion of an unpossessed country ready for settlement and appropriation, had been officially discredited. It should be emphasised that historians had been fully involved in this process of revision and counter-revision. Indeed, Henry Reynolds' personal support to Eddie Mabo had been crucial in providing him with the understanding of the legal issues at stake and with the motivation to continue his battle to have his property acknowledged and returned. Moreover, *The Law of the Land*—another book by Reynolds—had been influential in shaping the climate of opinion that led the Judges of the High Court to that landmark decision.<sup>39</sup>

Since the late 1990s, while addressing the issue of unsundered Aboriginal sovereignty, the debate centred again on the question of the ultimate genocidal nature of Australia's Aboriginal policies.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless attacks and allegations contesting the very notion of 'stolen generations' or colonial massacres, have repeatedly appeared in the press and have represented what could be described as a concerted assault on the 'black armband' interpretation of Australian history.<sup>41</sup> It is in this context that the most explicit denunciations of the

<sup>38</sup> Bain Attwood, 'Mabo, Australia and the end of History', in *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines and Australia*, ed. Bain Attwood (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 116. It should be noted that a very similar argument could be made in relation to the Oslo process and the conservative politics of Israel. In this case, the official recognition of Palestinian rights to an independent state (at least in a future perspective) has upset the historical vision of a Jewish state established on the whole of Palestine. This recognition has been so distressing that the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin remains the only case of political murder in a modern democracy that has attained entirely its objective.

<sup>39</sup> See N. Loos, *Edward Koiki Mabo: His Life and Struggle for Land Rights* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1996); and Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1987).

<sup>40</sup> In 2000 *Quadrant* repropounded these themes in a series of articles by historian Keith Windschuttle. The antipodean version of 'negationism' à la David Irving stressed the notion of impossibility of 'frontier' violence. Such an approach rejects three decades of historical research with a self-fulfilling proposition: the British were civilised and could not do barbaric things; they did not perform massacres because they were civilised. Here is an example: '[t]here is one good, general reason why we should expect the eventual compilation of regional studies to produce a very much smaller tally of violent Aboriginal deaths than the 20,000 now claimed [by Reynolds]. Ever since they were founded in 1788, the British colonies in Australia were civilised societies governed by both morality and laws that forbade the killing of the innocent. The notion that the frontier was a place where white men could kill blacks with impunity ignores the powerful cultural and legal prohibitions on such action [sic]. For a start, most colonists were Christians to whom such actions were abhorrent. But even those whose consciences would not have been troubled knew it was against the law to murder human beings, Aborigines included, and the penalty was death.' This was a type of historical reasoning certainly not to be troubled by minor details such as historical evidence. See Windschuttle, 'The Break-Up of Australia', *Quadrant*, September, October, and November 2000, and *The Fabrication of Australian History*.

<sup>41</sup> Bain Attwood has addressed some of these issues in 'A Tour of Duty in Australia's History Wars'. See also Robert Manne, 'In Denial: the Stolen Generation and the Right', *Australian Quarterly Essay* 1 (2001); and Raymond Evans and Bill Thorpe, 'Indigenocide and the Massacre of Aboriginal History', *Overland* 163 (Winter 2001).

Australian approach to genocide have come about, especially the collection of essays edited by Ann Curthoys and John Docker that appeared in *Aboriginal History*.<sup>42</sup> In the meantime, the notion that a colonial genocide was consistently attempted in Australia has become prevalent.<sup>43</sup> While the debate intensified markedly, it is perhaps no surprise that this increase coincided with one of the largest political rallies of Australian history on Sydney Harbour Bridge in July 2000—a rally strongly supportive of the reactivation of the Reconciliation process. While the actual content of ‘reconciliation’ is still unclear, it is a fact of Australian political life that the public opinion is, on this issue, strongly divided.

The recrudescence of disqualified historical accepted wisdom is by now another fact of Australian intellectual life. Philip Ruddock’s (the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs) remarks on Aboriginal incapacity of developing the wheel and Keith Windschuttle’s logic in excluding homicidal intentions on the basis of ‘Christian beliefs’ (and other forensic approaches to the question of Aboriginal casualties and stolen generations) are all examples of this tendency. The crucial point, however, is that the very reference to settler violence—or to genocidal practices perpetrated by the administration of the state—brings into question the foundation of the Australian State. As well as in the Israeli case, historical reflection has produced the need for an inevitable reconciliation between what survives of the Australian historical orthodoxy and a history of genocidal violence and erasure from memory. This necessity is epitomised in Reynolds’ famous call for inclusion:

How, then, do we deal with the Aboriginal dead? White Australians frequently say ‘all that’ should be forgotten. But it will not be. It cannot be. Black memories are too deeply, too recently scarred. And forgetfulness is a strange prescription coming from a community which has revered the fallen warrior and emblazoned the phrase ‘Lest We Forget’ on monuments throughout the land. If the ‘Aborigines are to enter our history ‘on terms of most perfect equality’, as Thomas Mitchell termed it, they will bring their dead with them and expect an honored burial. So our embarrassment is compounded. Do we give up our cherished ceremonies or do we make room for the Aboriginal dead on our memorials, cenotaphs, boards of honor and even in the pantheon of national heroes?<sup>44</sup>

While Reynolds’ call appeared at the beginning of the 1980s, the most contested ground remains the issue of casualties on the frontier, and the successive exclusion of Aboriginal people: the acknowledgement of violence on Australia’s land wars. In terms resonating the Israeli experience, the historical debate is still

<sup>42</sup> Ann Curthoys and John Docker, eds, ‘Genocide’?: *Australian Aboriginal History in International Perspective*, *Aboriginal History* 2 (2001): 1–172. However, Anna Haebich’s *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families, 1800–2000* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000) and Henry Reynolds’ *An Indelible Stain?* also represent important historical reflections emphasising the relevance of the question of genocide to Australian history.

<sup>43</sup> See A. Dirk Moses, ‘An Antipodean Genocide? The Origins of the Genocidal Moment in the Colonization of Australia’, *Journal of Genocide Research* 1, no. 2 (2000); and A.E. Palmer, *Colonial Genocide* (Bathurst: Crawford House Publishing, 2000).

<sup>44</sup> Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, 201.

addressing the moment of Indigenous expulsion (expulsion from the record as well as from the land), an erasure based on an explicitly racial rationale: the founding violence of a settler society.<sup>45</sup>

### Towards a comparative interpretation

#### *National narratives*

The evolution of these two historiographies and the public debates that have surrounded them have proceeded along surprisingly similar lines. Both cases involved the rejection of a pervasive myth of an egalitarian society. And in both cases, this intellectual operation was performed by exposing this myth in the light of the dispossession of Indigenous people and their segregation. The parallels are even more striking when one considers the enormous difference between the two test cases. The relative absence of violent challenge in the Australian case opposed to the recurring epitome of violence represented by suicidal/homicidal attacks encapsulates this divergence (yet, the two cases do present some common characteristics).<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, there are other points of divergence: for example, the internationalisation of one conflict opposed to the repeatedly reaffirmed uniqueness of Australian sovereignty, regardless of Aboriginal attempts to involve international organisations to monitor their grievances, and regardless of Israeli attempts to prevent any foreign intervention in their dealings with Palestinians. Among these divergences one should also consider the often fundamentalist nature of Israeli actions against the Palestinian population opposed to the official rhetoric of a multicultural Australian state, a dissimilarity that pervasively informs both intellectual environments.

Despite obvious chasms, the issues brought about by these historiographical redescriptions—the discourses on the founding violence—have re-emerged in comparable ways and have encountered similar public and political rejections. Moreover, these discourses operate in a similar fashion to delegitimise moral

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, the forum held at the National Museum of Australia, 13–14 December 2001, on these issues and especially Richard Broome, 'The Statistics of Frontier Conflict' in *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, ed. Bain Attwood (Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2003) and <http://www.nma.gov.au/frontierconflict/>

<sup>46</sup> This point deserves an exploratory note. Albeit in completely different forms and contexts, auto-destructing practices are sometimes apparent in both Aboriginal and Palestinian behaviour: in the case of Palestinian resistance, the agency is recognised (and acted upon with anti-insurgency violence) while the destruction brought about by a colonial regime is disregarded; in the other case, the destruction of Aboriginal society is acknowledged (and acted upon, through an intervention at the level of welfare) while Indigenous agency is still aggressively rejected. In both cases we may witness a comprehensive misunderstanding based on the incapacity/unwillingness of appraising at the same time the effects of a devastating colonial regime and Indigenous agency. In one case, the Indigenous presence that precedes the establishment of the colonial regime is substituted by absence, in the other case the autonomy that survives its establishment is denied. Acknowledging Palestinian devastation would demand abandoning the settlement enterprise, recognising Aboriginal agency would require allowing for Aboriginal autonomy. Conservative opinion in neither Australia nor Israel is apparently willing to perform this exercise.

claims to the comprehensive sovereignty to their respective polities: it should be noted that both the Mabo decision of 1992 and the Oslo process raised/reproposed the issue of Aboriginal/Palestinian sovereignty to their respective publics—a perspective that had, until then, been utterly refused.<sup>47</sup> The historiographical revision that presupposed, preceded and accompanied both processes of appeasement has, then, operated in two and interconnected directions: on the one hand, the responsibility of the settler state in invasion, dispossession, and displacement—the violence preemptorily used against the Indigenous population to enforce balances of power that would be appropriate for the colonising project; and, on the other hand, the institutional working of the settler state, a machine used and deployed with all its strength to accelerate the disappearance—cultural, but especially demographic and even historical—of the Indigenous presence.<sup>48</sup> It was a comprehensive redescription, an even more comprehensive reassessment than a superficial look would entail: whereas one aspect refers to the history that precedes the establishment of the colonial relation, the other characteristic refers to the history that follows that moment.

Regardless of the revolutionary character of this redescription—or perhaps as a result of it—in both cases the ‘new histories’ have failed to command the public opinion and become accepted wisdom. The difficulties of accepting a revised version of the country’s history and the painful process of accepting the consequences of this revision, have brought about a situation in which the politics of a partially reforming settler state has lost contact with a historiographical debate that proceeded in an ever more isolated fashion. The historiographical transformation backfired in both countries during the second half of the 1990s and in more recent years. The suggestion here is that both ‘Mabo’ and ‘Oslo’ have failed when they came to face the question of ‘returning land’. As a result, and despite the intellectual shifts that these processes implied, in both polities, returning land remains taboo for conservative discourses—not only because such action would constitute an intolerable reallocation of resources, but because it would bring to

<sup>47</sup> David Day’s *Claiming a Continent* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2001) is a recent overview of Australian history that repeatedly insists on the fragility of both claims to the continent: the original British one and that of today’s non-Indigenous Australia, a claim that, as long as the issue of Aboriginal sovereignty is not settled, descends directly from its predecessor. In this respect, it is noteworthy that the settler societies that have evolved differently in their relationship with their moral legitimacy are apparently better off. As Helen Clark—Labour Prime Minister of Aotearoa/New Zealand—confided to the readers of the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, ‘I think you [Australians] feel more insecure [even though] I think you should be secure and confident in what you are and who you are. I think New Zealand often appears to the rest of the world to be more secure, confident and independent than Australia’, *Australian Women’s Weekly*, November 2001, 56.

<sup>48</sup> In this respect the experiences of Australia and Israel diverge in a marked way. While the permanence of Aboriginal names on the Australian landscape is indicative of a colonial state of mind that is conscious of the irreversibility of conquest, in the Israeli case, the need for a complete reformation of the geographical nomenclature witnesses an attitude far less secure. See M. Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land Since 1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and M. Klein, *Jerusalem: The Contested City* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000).



a crisis the founding myths of a society based, essentially, on the invariable denial of Indigenous legitimacy to land.

'Returning' land would necessitate disengaging from a state of mind that interprets settler acquisition of land in quasi-mythical and non-negotiable terms. Both countries still display their own versions of *terra nullius*, a condition that forbids the very notion of a negotiated settlement. While *terra nullius* is a relative exception in settler societies, and both 'Mabo' and 'Oslo' have officially and traumatically denied it, it appears that the settler state has been, so far, incapable of reforming its founding myths. Departing from *terra nullius* has, therefore, been easier on paper than on the ground and the incapacity of 'returning land' demonstrated by both the Australian native title legislation post-1993 and the transitory status of the accords that have followed Oslo prove this beyond the mere political unwillingness of conservative administrations.

The historical reference to violence, but also—at the other end of the spectrum—the downright refusal of even discussing its existence, then, emerges as a crucial site for the production and reproduction of historical and historiographical discourses—a contested ground in the process of redefinition of national identities. For the left, the emergence of the discourses of Aboriginal or Palestinian history has always been connected with the necessity of reappraising the historical record and liberating the interpretation of history from the shackles of what they perceived to be an outdated system of beliefs.<sup>49</sup> However, the production of history is increasingly a strategic arena for the intellectual production of the right too: it is perhaps not a coincidence that Benjamin Netanyahu, former Israeli Prime Minister, has published 'revisionist' history ('revisionist' according to Israeli terminology, following the intellectual tradition of Zeev Jabotinsky, the father of right wing Zionism) and that John Howard has based much of his success on the awareness of the necessity of recapturing history for the Liberal camp.<sup>50</sup> The Orwellian necessity of controlling historical production, or at least contesting left wing departures from traditional narratives, has been one important feature of conservative strategies in both Israel and Australia.

The distance between intellectual discourses and public perceptions is not new in Israel, and in many ways is one of the founding characteristics of the original repudiation of traditional Jewry upon which much of Zionism is based. An analogous tendency is detectable in Australia, where a fierce form of anti-intellectualism has always been prominent. An egalitarian tradition covering notable and growing social differences is exceptionally strong in both countries. Inevitably, the historiographical transition brought about by academic discourses

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, K.W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>50</sup> See also Sean Brawley, 'A Comfortable and Relaxed Past: John Howard and the "Battle of History" The First Phase—February 1992 to March 1996', *The Electronic Journal of Australian and New Zealand History* 1 (1996).

has to contend with a distinctively hostile environment, both at the political level and at the level of the public opinion.

#### *National identities*

The question of violence as the founding trait of the settler state and community and the consequences that this fact inescapably has on the legitimacy of the state epitomises a difficult passage.<sup>51</sup> Peter Read's recent proposals, in a book aptly entitled *Belonging*, for a swap over between 'belonging' (for white Australians) in exchange for a settlement involving native title echoes, in some ways, the intellectual framework for the establishment of a Palestinian state as delineated in the Oslo process (and in the Road Map) and summarised in the formulation 'land for peace'.<sup>52</sup>

As well as acknowledging the 'founding violence' of their societies, both historiographical redescrptions have had to face the historical experience of exclusion of Palestinian and Aboriginal minorities from citizenship rights. In both cases the Indigenous population has been subjected to a regime of extraordinary control that has been improved only at a tantalisingly slow pace (I am referring to the experience of Israeli Palestinians—of course, the Palestinians of the Occupied Territories have had no access to any citizenship right). Both minorities have witnessed a severe limitation of their constitutional rights in a context of strong influx of settler/migrants, in a situation in which the institutions of the settler state were geared up to assimilate the newcomers as quickly as possible and as effectively as possible. While migrants were more or less rapidly absorbed in the context of the settler society, Indigenous minorities in both cases were legally and practically excluded from any meaningful participation.<sup>53</sup>

Despite consistent attempts to participate in the institutions of the settler state without abandoning cultural autonomy, both minorities have been incessantly perceived as irreducibly alien to the very nature of the national communities that were developing their colonising project. Israel's original lay character had always provided a constitutional framework for the existence of national minorities within its borders. In the light of this analysis, it is Australia that emerges as a country in which the relationship between foundational myths and historical conscience remains especially unresolved. The refusal to seriously approach reconciliation and sign a treaty that would settle the issue of Aboriginal sovereignty may characterise the Australian case

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, the analysis of Israeli legitimacy *vis a vis* the Palestinian authority contained in P. Anderson, 'Scurrying Towards Bethlehem', *New Left Review* 10 (2001).

<sup>52</sup> See Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>53</sup> See John Chesterman and Brian Galligan, *Citizens Without Rights: Aborigines and Australian Citizenship* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Tim Rowse's 'Indigenous Citizenship' in *Rethinking Australian Citizenship*, eds W. Hudson and J. Kane (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

as displaying strong elements of what could be called 'settler fundamentalism'.<sup>54</sup> Donald Denoon's contention that Australian cultural and political practice had made Australians the faithful representatives of an irredeemably colonialist ideology appears, two decades after its original publication, vindicated.<sup>55</sup>

While in both cases the necessity of permanently settling these contradictions enjoys a wide public currency, the political reluctance to act in the inevitable direction of acknowledging violence and remove exclusion (while returning land) serves as a reminder that the appeal of the colonial project still exercises a strong influence in the discursive production of both countries. Bain Attwood has perceptively stressed the 'revolutionary' nature of native title detection in Australia:

the historical changes *Mabo* portends in the space of Australia challenge a narrative of the nation which has measured its progress relative to an Aboriginal absence or dispossession in that space while simultaneously constructing Aboriginality as the past, and so Aboriginal possession of the land of Australia symbolises for conservatives the end of progress and thus the end of history.<sup>56</sup>

This logic may also apply for the political sectors in Israeli society that contest the very possibility of a peace process that would return some land to the Palestinians. The return of land—or the acknowledgment that some land escaped dispossession and that the colonial project did not and cannot succeed to its extreme conclusion, becomes, then, a crucial passage in the process of abandonment of what could be defined as a 'settler mentality', a state of mind that important sections of both societies never abandoned. It ought to be stressed that this 'settler mentality' is not unique to Israel and Australia. For example, 'America's Last Taboo', the United States' unquestioning and automatic support for Israeli actions in the Occupied Territories, could be determined by a combination of a 'settler mentality' (curbed at home by the necessities of political correctness) appeased by images evoking a 'frontier' enterprise carried out by courageous pioneers—individually armed, and organised along fundamentalist communities—and by the influence exercised by the Zionist lobby on Washington's politics.<sup>57</sup> A similar settler reflex can be seen in action in relation to reaction

<sup>54</sup> The result of the 2001 Federal election may have been determined also by John Howard's refusal to proceed on the road of reconciliation (as opposed to Labor's commitment to a formal apology). Commentators have stressed the obvious role played by the issue of refugees in determining voting patterns, yet the insistence on racial overtones as displayed by the Liberal leadership should remind us that, the two issues are overlapping. For an analysis of the re-emergence of racial discourse in 1990s Australia, see Andrew Markus, *Race: John Howard and the Remaking of Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001).

<sup>55</sup> Donald Denoon, 'The Isolation of Australian History', *Historical Studies* 87 (October 1986).

<sup>56</sup> Attwood, 'Mabo, Australia and the End of History', 116.

<sup>57</sup> See Edward Said, 'America's Last Taboo', *New Left Review* 6 (2000). Said, however, does not refer to settler mentality and concentrates on the role of the Zionist lobby in American public life. See also E. Shohat, 'Antinomies of Exile: Said at the Frontiers of National Narration', in *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*, ed. M. Sprinker (Blackwell: Oxford, 1992), especially 140–1.

to developments in Zimbabwe. Albeit for completely different reasons, the Zimbabwean case also strikes a sensitive chord in settler psyche of 'white' Commonwealth nations and especially Australia: images of angry 'blackfellows' squatting on badly dispossessed land and confronting a very isolated settler population commonly perceived as both demographically weak and militarily powerless represent a 'worst case scenario' that cannot fail to raise very, very anxious concerns, as the British Commonwealth split along racial lines has recently demonstrated.<sup>58</sup> Yet, while these considerations may reveal a colonialist state of mind in postcolonial politics, Australia and Israel remain exceptional among settler societies in their inability to develop any genuinely postcolonial framework of institutional action.<sup>59</sup> To engage in any sort of postcolonial understanding one must embrace a vision of history that does not interpret Indigenous erasure or absence in terms of 'progress' from an irreducibly detrimental past. In this respect, these nations' public understandings share the apparent incapacity, despite the efforts, of distancing themselves from the 'founding violence' that underlies their establishment.

The Oslo process has transformed the PLO from an exiled nationalist movement into a governmental apparatus instated on its territory. On the other hand, the 'treaty' or 'treaties' that have been repeatedly proposed with Aboriginal Australia would enable the shift from a type of sovereignty which is unilaterally negated to one that is negotiated and acquires its legitimacy in a shared consensus. A comparative analysis supports the notion that the postcolonial passage is particularly difficult in a context where unresolved issues are still active and where a conspiracy of silence on the 'founding violence' remains hegemonic in significant sectors of the public opinion. The very nature of these discussions suggests that 'colonial' projects are still operating. While this is obviously true in a context in which new Jewish settlements are constantly projected and militarily enforced, in the Australian case the idea of assimilation—of assimilation interpreted as a loss of autonomy for Aboriginal communities—is also still present in administrative and political practices. While a final settlement is not possible without a strong political commitment, this is not likely to occur as long as public perceptions are strongly opposed to accepting the idea that the original settlement of European settlers entailed Indigenous dispossession and negation of Indigenous sovereignty.<sup>60</sup> It is not a coincidence that both 'Mabo' and 'Oslo' failed irrevocably at the very moment of acknowledging Aboriginal sovereignty/Palestinian statehood.

<sup>58</sup> See for example, D. Shanahan, 'Commonwealth Splits on Zimbabwe Sanctions', *Australian*, 4 March 2002. It should be noted that no commentator in Australia has referred to the necessity of a political settlement for the redistribution of land ownership (more than twenty years after the fall of Rhodesia's white supremacist regime).

<sup>59</sup> One should mention here that in both countries it was the Supreme Court that played an essential part in bringing about the more visible institutional transformations. The conservative opinion has always argued against the interventionism of the judiciary power.

<sup>60</sup> See Henry Reynolds, *Aboriginal Sovereignty: Reflections on Race, State and Nation* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996).

Yet despite the deadlock in the political processes of peace/reconciliation, there is still room for a positive development. A fully multicultural Australia and the formula of 'two states side by side on the land of Palestine/Israel' cannot prescind from a comprehensively developed exercise in historical redescription.

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