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EDITORIAL

What can settler colonial studies offer to an interpretation of the conflict in Israel–Palestine?

Afterwords typically refer to the editors' hard work: setting up panels, organising and attending conferences, patiently waiting for and coordinating the contributing authors. I cannot claim any of this. This special issue practically edited itself. Since *Settler Colonial Studies* was set up in 2010, a steady flow of submissions has addressed the issue of settler colonialism as a specific mode of domination in contemporary Israel/Palestine. The journal also ran a special issue in 2012 on the ways in which the study of settler colonialism contributes to the analysis of contemporary and historical Israel–Palestine.[1] At that relatively earlier stage, the very admissibility of settler colonial studies as an interpretative framework in that context was an object of discussion. Since then, the scholarly conversation has moved rapidly. The works collected in this special issue demonstrate it. However, while this brief editorial tentatively outlines some of the ways in which settler colonial studies as a heuristic device can contribute to the analysis of the history and contemporary predicament of Israel–Palestine, it is primarily an invitation to a scholarly discussion; unlike the settler colonial projects it studies, settler colonial studies as a comparative endeavour does not aim to displace.

First, but very importantly, settler colonial studies may allow us to get the tenses right. We routinely use the present tense to refer to 'the conflict'. When it comes to this loaded topic, we may be getting the tenses wrong. What is in front of us is not a conflict situation, is actually a postconflict (postconflicts are rarely peaceful). The conflict for Greater Palestine was resolved in 1948 and sealed in 1967. Like settlers elsewhere, Zionists came to stay, and like the descendants of settlers in other settler societies, they won decisively. This is why Israel no longer wins conflicts the decisive way it used to: as winning can be defined as no longer needing to win, it is inevitably facing diminishing returns. The current predicament is the result of a victory that has already been attained, and, conversely, a defeat that has already been suffered.

Getting the tense right is especially important because paradigms inform perception. The received interpretation is that there is a conflict and that it results from an ethnonational struggle; in other words that there is an ethnic conflict because there are Palestinians. Alas, it is actually the other way round: the Palestinian national collective *in its current configuration* is the result of the end of the conflict. The Palestinian experience is fundamentally shaped by displacement and by the Occupation. Settler colonial studies allows us to consider that the colonial policy of segregation that was imposed after the successful repression of the first Intifada was profoundly discontinuous with the settler colonial policy of subordinate integration Israel had previously pursued.[2] *Vae victis*, woe unto the vanquished, said Brennus exacting gold from the Romans beyond the terms of their surrender. *Vae victores*, one should note in the context of a postcolonial dialectic.

Second, settler colonial studies as applied to the Israeli–Palestinian postconflict can be used to look beyond the confrontation opposing Israelis and Palestinians. Detailing the opposition pitting

colonialism and settler colonialism as distinct modes of domination allows an approach that thinks past a zero sum game involving two ethnonational contenders. Settler colonial studies can explain why, relatively speaking, and settler colonial studies is a programmatically comparative endeavour, even though it is endowed with an immense and truly unprecedented power, the Zionist settler colonial project is ultimately unable to complete the settler colonial conquest of Palestine and become like the other settler societies. I am not saying this because I wish it did a better job at erasing Palestinians, like other settlers did elsewhere. The Palestinian national collective, however, fragmented as it is in a variety of separate polities and configurations, is one crucial irreversible 'fact on the ground' produced by a colonial occupation of the Occupied Territories that ultimately maximises the opportunities for its social reproduction. There is nothing that cements national collectives better than a sustained denial of national rights. Ask the Poles or the Irish. And ask the Palestinians. Vice versa, there is nothing that erases autonomous indigenous sovereign capabilities like the forcible extension of settler citizenship rights. Ask the American Indians after allotment. Unlike colonialism, settler colonialism as a distinct mode of domination erases indigeneity by unevenly extending settler rights.

Third, settler colonial studies enables us to understand Zionism in a way that exceptionalist narratives cannot. Settlement was Herzl's response to anti-Semitism. Jews would be excellent settlers, he thought; better than other settlers elsewhere, and by *doing* would respond to systematic fabrications about *being*. In this respect, Herzl's approach was similar to that of Marx. Marx had argued that the 'Jewish Question' will be extinguished through full assimilation. This would have required (this would have amounted to) a revolution. Herzl did not want a revolution, and thought, paradoxically, that integration without revolution could only be achieved outside of Europe, where Jews would *do* what Europeans typically do outside of Europe and thus *become* Europeans. Displacement and settlement were Herzl's alternative to revolution. In this, he was indeed unoriginal, one among many to think in these terms while facing a revolutionary prospect. Thus, settlement was not a means to an end, and Zionism was not primarily about the state. It was primarily about settlement. In the context of a prefigurative practice it was the end. Settler colonial studies can help decentre the state from the analysis of the conflict.

Settlement, nothing else, was the absolute core of Zionist practice. The relationship between the political traditions of settler colonialism in general and the state is indeed fraught. Settler colonies often resulted in strong states, but this was often not their original purpose. The settlers that displaced elsewhere during the age of the 'Settler Revolution' and understood their movement as endowed with inherent sovereign capabilities were often escaping consolidating sovereigns.[3] Anyone acquainted, for example, with the contestations pitting Federalists and anti-Federalists and their successors during the early Republic era in the USA would recognise this centrifugal tendency. The settlers' loyalty to their sovereigns is always ultimately conditional to their being distant and remaining so (except when they are needed to fend off geopolitical challenges mounted by resisting indigenous peoples). It is not absolute – settlement is – and as such, loyalty is easily conceded.

States can promote settlement for their own purposes, but states ultimately promote themselves; they are their own primary concern. States *control* populations, all populations, even if they very rarely control them as equals. Settlement, however, is about selective reproduction. Zionist understandings of history as heading inexorably towards the establishment of the state fundamentally misunderstand Zionism as settlement. Settlement is a particular social formation that aims to supersede itself, but states aim towards their continuation. Settler colonial studies also allows us to reflect originally on this contradiction and on 'occupations', a very particular colonial form developed by the USA after the Mexican War and perfected in the context of a century and a half of overseas interventions that, like settler colonialism but unlike other

colonialisms, aims towards its own supersession (but in the case of the colonial occupation of the Palestinian 'Territories' does not).

Fourth, settler colonial studies enables us to interpret Zionist claims about indigeneity. These are fraught claims, and all settlers claim to be 'indigenous'. *Haaretz* journalist Bradley Burston recently faced this issue and rhetorically asked: 'if Jews are not indigenous here [i.e., Israel], does that mean that Jews can never be indigenous anywhere?'[4] Pace Burston, and rhetoric aside, this question has a straight answer. Settler colonial studies can illustrate this point: irrespective of whether specific populations in discrete historical eras are biologically linked (and they may not be), the very notion of a 'Promised Land' makes it so.[5] People that are promised land somewhere else constitute by definition a sociopolitical collective that is organised prior to its arrival, as good a definition of being exogenous as any. One cannot celebrate the movement to the land and understand oneself as having always been there. This is not about being anti-Semitic or unreasonable. This is about following the logic that is inherent to the specific stories that define a particular settler sociopolitical collective (even in its non-religious versions Zionism, like all settler colonialisms, has a Promised Land and sees itself re-enacting a Biblical story). Zionists are not indigenous; they entertain an historical, that is, a non-ontological relationship to the land. It is a meaningful relationship, but is not that of an indigenous collective.

Of course, as settlers are non-indigenous, they are forever indigenising (without 'going native', of course). Most settlers do, unlike other colonisers who dream of returning 'home'. Being the subject of indigenising processes is not the same as being indigenous, and one type of being rules the other out; this is why settlers can never become 'natives'. The question then is how to be efficient self-indigenisers. The fundamental, that is, the foundational stories must change: a degree of indigeneity, even if not unqualified indigeneity, can be acquired. Ask Sir Walter Scott, who knew a thing or two about foundational stories and knew that the descendants of Britain's rulers were not indigenous. Narratives that sustain the notion of political accommodation with an indigenous polity are absolutely necessary to settler indigenisations. They can sustain very solid settler colonial projects. But there cannot be settler indigenisation without recognition of indigenous collective existence. That is why, like for extending rights, for Zionist indigenising purposes, recognising rather than foreclosing a Palestinian sovereignty would be a more effective approach than the current reliance on generalised repression. Settler colonial studies can explain the dynamic underpinning this paradox. Likewise, as new stories must be told, some stories should be let go of. The 'Law of Return', for example, is premised on a particular narrative that forecloses settler indigenisation precisely because it declares that an exogenous element is as much indigenous as one that has already indigenised. The notion of a 'State of the Jews' also similarly prevents settler indigenisation by preemptively declaring that all Zionist indigenising efforts are ultimately futile. Paradoxically, but it is a paradox that is telling of the preparation of the current Israeli leadership, as PM Netanyahu repeatedly asks PA leader Mahmoud Abbas and everyone else to recognise Israel as the 'country of the Jews' and the latter refuses, it is Abbas that is left doing important Zionist work.

Postscript: settler colonial studies can also help understanding the 2015 Israeli election. Benyamin Netanyahu thrives on fear but in the early months of 2015 his peddling of the traditional fears – the Iranian bomb, a messy Middle East – was not working. The pre-election polls consistently anticipated trouble for him. He was just not finding the right fear and seemed out of touch. At the last minute, however, he did find one. His Facebook page reported: 'The rule of the right is in danger. Arab voters are advancing in large numbers toward voting places. Leftist organizations are bringing them in buses'.[6] The image evoked in his message is important; it resonated powerfully with the electorate and possibly earned Netanyahu nine

parliamentary seats in the space of a few hours. This formulation demonstrates that he was not out of touch. In this formulation, 'Arabs' are not autonomous agents; someone else is moving them. Stating that Arabs were 'advancing' (a clearly military term) would have also not been credible. But 'Arabs' 'advancing' (albeit passively) in order to exercise a sovereign right (i.e. voting) touched a raw nerve. Yet again, 'Arabs' being bussed somewhere else is an inevitable reference to the Nakba, and Arabs voting was represented as a reverse Nakba: instead of being thrown across borders, this time they were supposedly being displaced towards the exercise of a sovereign capacity. The Nakba is important for Palestinians, but transfer for the settler colonial project remains fundamental.

Notes

1. Omar Jabary Salamanca, Mezna Qato, Kareem Rabie, and Sobhi Samour, eds., *Special Issue: Past is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine, Settler Colonial Studies*, 2, 1, (2012).
2. I expand on this topic in Lorenzo Veracini, 'The Other Shift: Settler Colonialism, Israel and the Occupation', *Journal of Palestine Studies* XLII, no. 2 (2013): 26–42.
3. See James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
4. Bradley Burston, 'How to Lie about Israel', *Haaretz*, 29 April 2014.
5. See, for example, Shlomo Sand, *How I Stopped Being a Jew* (London: Verso, 2014).
6. See Gershom Gorenberg, 'Netanyahu's Campaign Finale Dealt a Body Blow to Israeli Democracy', *Haaretz*, 19 March 2015.

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