KNIR
ROYAL NETHERLANDS
INSTITUTE IN ROME

Settler Colonialism as a Structure?
Reflections on Settler Colonial Discourse and Expert Responses

Introduction

Jeremia Pelgrom & Clemens Six

Ever since the publication of Patrick Wolfe's seminal paper on settler colonialism's logic of elimination, historians have debated with new vigour what settler colonialism is, when and why it originally emerged, and how it has shaped the world we live in today. Among other things, this growing historical interest resulted in the evolution of a distinct research field on settler colonialism with its own specialised journal and numerous publications on a wide range of case studies across different time periods and geographical regions. Arguably, the most striking characteristic of this emerging field is its structural approach, which recognises settlers as a distinct analytical category that operates according to agendas different from those of colonial powers based in the metropole. This approach not only serves to distinguish various colonial modes of operation, but its structural perspective also holds the potential to reveal the underlying forces and patterns driving settler colonial expansion. On the other hand, critics have pointed out the limitations of this approach, particularly its emphasis on colonial agents, which tends to overlook indigenous agency and empowerment in these processes. The suggestion of a single, unifying logic driving this phenomenon across various historical and geographical contexts has also been challenged, along with the rigid distinction between settler and exploitative colonial modes.

This publication emerges from a workshop held at the Royal Netherlands Institute (KNIR) in Rome in June 2024 organized in the contexts of the *Settler Colonial Paradigms* research program. It brings together a group of scholars from the Research Centre for Historical Studies at University of Groningen, who, as relative outsiders to the field, were invited to engage with this topical discourse from their own disciplinary perspectives. They present historiographical reflections on whether settler colonialism can be understood as a structure and how such an interpretation might enrich our historical understanding by offering a long-term perspective. The contributors cover a wide range of cases from the roots of settler colonialism in the ancient Mediterranean world to contemporary utopias about settling on Mars. The common goal of these contributions is to raise new questions and potentially examine case studies that specialists in the field have either overlooked or analysed from different angles. More specifically, they ask whether a structural approach does indeed allow us to identify core elements that characterised settler colonialism through the ages and across continents; what

distinguishes settler colonialism from other manifestations of colonialism; what the role of (access to) land was; which other socio-economic, cultural, and political-ideological factors can possibly explain settler colonialism; and what the relevance of this concept is to analyse and understand contemporary international and local relations around the globe?

In keeping with the dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of the discourse, these contributions are presented as reflections rather than fully polished academic papers. They feature light referencing and make no claim to exhaustive bibliographies or complete mastery of the topic. Instead, they represent responses from informed outsiders to the discourse, intended to spark further discussion by introducing fresh perspectives and expertise. The result is a mosaic of concise case studies that highlight two key points: settler colonialism is a complex, multi-layered concept that fuels thought-provoking debates on political, socio-economic, and cultural displacement throughout history; and the need for a comparative, global, and long-term analysis to precisely identify the structural elements driving this phenomenon and determine its potential connection to Modernity.