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Commentary to "Settler Colonialism as a Structure?"

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Building on the article "Settler Colonial Studies: A Historical Analysis" and on the ensuing exchange between this author and Ikuko Asaka, Antoinette Burton, and Sidney Lu in the journal Settler Colonial Studies (Schayegh 2024a and b; Lu 2024; Asaka 2024; Burton 2024) this commentary engages with the excellent interventions in the KNIR Dialogues Online issue "Settler Colonialism as a Structure?" to make a few basic inquiries.

Causes

Focusing on Ancient Rome, Jeremia Pelgrom's "The Ancient Roots of Settler Colonialism" and Jitse Daniels' "Caesar's World Turned Inside Out? Roman Provincial Colonisation and the 'Settler Revolution' of the First Century BCE" both address a question that is not central to most modern SCS studies: root causes. Both think these are not to be found in the to-be-settler-colonized areas themselves but, rather, in Rome; Romans were not pulled, but pushed out, into those areas. Both, too, argue these domestic causes were political—to Daniels, political-economic—in nature. However, in the case of Pelgrom the plebs played the central role, while Daniels argues the political root cause was intra-elite maneuvering (rather than the need to decrease popular pressures at home by sending people away, to settle elsewhere, an argument made by Lorenzo Veracini for the modern period, as Daniels notes).

Keeping in mind that an existential political issue in Europe and the Americas after the French revolution was mass demands for, elite fears about, and limits to popular political participation; and heeding the fact that certainly all modern Anglo settler colonies experienced bottom-up political emancipatory demands, leading to settler democracies, modern historians may be inspired by Pelgrom and Daniels' arguments to ask three questions. Where in modern Europe, and why, were "the masses" actively involved and interested in setting in motion settler colonial dynamics overseas? How did such—hypothetical—mass causes politically, economically, and culturally intersect with intra-elite disagreements about domestic politics and their overlap with overseas colonization? And what does it mean for our analysis that causes triggering settler dynamics (in Europe or elsewhere) did not only precede consequences but, rather, continued to operate long after the settler colonialisms' consequences, on land and natives, became palpable?

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Means and/versus ends

In "A Bright Future for Settler Colonialism? Fantasies on the Colonisation of Outer Space in a Historical Perspective," Clemens Six argues that "[T]he claim that space settlement is not a form of settler colonialism because there are no indigenous communities in outer space to be massacred to achieve control over land confuses settler colonialism's means with its end. … [I]t is important not to equate the elimination of people with the settlers' main objective, namely to occupy 'virgin' land in order to realise specific forms of social, economic, and political utopias in this supposedly empty space". While reasonable, this argument raises questions, too.

One question concerns historiography. Settler Colonial Studies' key scholarly interlocutors have been Indigenous Studies scholars. What role, if any, do they play here? Two other questions are conceptual. First, while it is correct that natives' elimination—in however form, physical or otherwise—is not a settler colonial end but a means, it also is a fundamental difference to colonialism, which seeks to exploit rather than eliminate natives, in principle (in practice, empirical cases are unendingly more complex). Put differently, settlers' eliminational relationship to natives, however changing, is fundamental to settler colonialism—so fundamental indeed that it is difficult to imagine settler colonialism without it. This is especially true when we consider the settlers' everyday life and experience: also here, the relationship to natives is fundamental. Yes, natives' (varying forms of) elimination is ultimately a means. But because it is experientially so fundamental and because it does not disappear but continues endlessly into the future, it seems indispensable to settler colonialism. Another, self-definitional conceptual argument here is Mahmood Mamdani's point, quoted in Mark Thompson's "When Does a Settler Become an Ancient Settler?", that "settlers and natives belong together. You cannot have one without the other, for it is the relationship between them that makes one a settler and the other a native."

The second conceptual question concerns settler colonialism's presumed end: land and (as a platform for) the creation of a utopian society. Here, two possibly but not necessarily reconcilable views, emotions, practices and ultimately objectives towards land—both on Earth and beyond, to follow Six's lead—seem to coexist for settlers. In one, land—or to be more precise: a specific land—is a value in and by itself and the meaning-creating place that allows one to become one's utopian self, individually and collectively; think of the Zionist motto "livnot ve-lehibanot," "to build (the land) and be rebuilt (as a free person)." In the other, in capitalism in a supposedly pure form, land is not a value in and by itself, and not a specific land. Rather, it is simply land, any land, defined and treated as a profit-producing space that, once exhausted, is to be abandoned for another land. That is: the latter is both in pure principle and in real practice exploitative and destructive. By contrast, the former may be in certain ways, certainly short-term, be conservationist, but also is in practice destructive.

To again follow Six and look beyond Earth, the tension between the two approaches to land is in evidence in the sci-fi series The Expanse. To Belters, inhabitants of the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, their asteroids are a real home, while to Mars and Earth capitalists, they are exchangeable objects to be mined and then abandoned. À propos the Belters, that is à propos Mars' and especially Earth's ultimately quite eliminationist approach to them: in their fictional case, Six can be said to be right. There indeed may be settler colonialism in outer space—because the proletarian workers sent by Earth's capitalists to work among the stars turn into (a new type of) natives.

Empires and capital

This point is simple. As Pelgrom, Daniels, and Dinah Wouters' "Reason of State Literature in Dutch Colonial Practice: Pieter van Hoorn in Batavia"—and contemporary cases like Israeli West Bank settlers—illustrate, there is no settler-colonialism without direct support by a state, preferably an imperial one. Continued capital investment is just as indispensable, often through channels protected by imperial state structures. Pelgrom, Daniels, and Wouters together show that this double fact is critical to explaining when and why diffuse "settler-y" practices became sustainably and truly settler-colonial (Pelgrom, Daniels), and when and why SC did not happen (Wouters). This double fact may also help us (re)consider how important the continued investment of capital managed through (post-)imperial cities like London and New York and/or continued geostrategic and military cooperation with the heir of the British Empire, i.e. the American empire, was after key settler colonies like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand became independent. By contrast, the case of South Africa, whose Apartheid settler government fell not the least because the United States withdrew its support, and the case of Israel, which depends heavily on the United States even if it also "gives back" technology and intelligence—for which reason tensions with Washington create existential angst among Israelis—suggest that continued outside capital-and/cum-imperial support is truly existential to settler states.

Is Settler Colonialism a Structure?

"Yes, but" seems to be a reasonable answer. Patrick Wolfe, Veracini, and other theoreticians of settler colonialism and historians have made excellent cases for the "yes" part of the answer. At the same time, as the reflections in this issue and many other studies show, the "but" part of the answer matters as much. Moreover, there is not one, but several complex "but's" that involve questions such as "what does this structure itself consist of;" "how complex is its maintenance and what does said maintenance affect its very nature;" and "how does it dependent on wider external structures" (see my point 3, above). Hence, one possible way to think about settler colonialism might be to reflect on what the "yes" and the "but" parts of one's answer are generally conceptually and in concrete empirical cases.

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