

## **From Batavia to Starbase: Property and sovereignty between settler colonialism and venture colonialism**

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What is the rationale of settler colonialism? For Cornelis Chastelein, a senior VOC official in the Dutch colony of Batavia, the answer was simple. “It is well known,” he stated in 1705 (Chastelein 1885, 63), “that colonies or plantations come into being and must grow through the influx of people, which is their soul.” Colonies, in short, exist by the grace of colonists. Yet as Chastelein realized, that was precisely the problem in Batavia, where, almost a century since its establishment, a large influx of settlers from Europe had never materialized. Writing on his estate Siringsing, some twenty-five kilometers outside of Batavia, Chastelein knew what he was talking about: the youngest son of a Huguenot family with strong ties to the colonial merchant elite in the Dutch Republic, he was himself a colonist, having migrated from Amsterdam to Batavia when he was still a teenager. Now, in his late forties, he served as a member of the Council of the Indies – the VOC’s governing board in Batavia. Yet in his colonial enterprise (Chastelein purportedly started the first coffee plantation in Southeast Asia), he exploited enslaved labourers (mostly originating from Ambon) to work the land. Chastelein thus embodied the wider early modern development in European empires from settler colonialism to exploitative colonialism, replacing settlement policies with chattel slavery. In his report from 1705, he formulated a telling answer to the question why this development had taken place. Those to blame for the lack of colonists in Batavia, he argued (Chastelein 1885, 64), were “the merchants, who care too much about present profits,” while “a colony needs a long time to produce the desired fruits.” The short-term mindset of modern commerce had prevailed over the longtermism of classical colonization.

Chastelein’s remarks offer an important perspective on the main theme addressed by the essays in this collection: the structural elements that drive (or impede) settler colonial dynamics. The steering assumption behind the collection is that we may determine these structures by looking back at classical antiquity, identifying the ideological and institutional dimensions of classical (especially Roman) colonial models, and detecting the ways in which these models may have reactivated later instances of colonial expansion, from seventeenth-century Batavia to the Space Age. This focus on the successful reactivation of settler colonial paradigms rooted in antiquity, however, risks obfuscating another question, illustrated by Chastelein’s case: how to account for the failure of settler colonialism to materialize? Or to put it differently: why did classical models *not* give shape to modern colonial practices? In the following remarks, I will provide some reflections on this question, using the case of



Batavia to explore the interplay between property and sovereignty, commerce and land, state and corporation, and myth and reality.

By the time Chastelein was writing, it was hard not to refer to antiquity when thinking about colonies. The concept of colony has obvious Latin roots, and the re-use of the concept in sixteenth-century Europe, from Machiavelli onwards, was intrinsically linked to the rediscovery of classical colonial ideas and practices, formulated in literary texts and legal documents. As Jeremia Pelgrom points out in his contribution to this collection, key writers in the classical canon, from Plato to Livy, left an influential historical-philosophical legacy that considered colonization a useful mechanism of social engineering and emancipation, specifically through the distribution of land. This legacy, strengthened by the model of Rome as a timeless paragon of imperial success, clearly shaped the intellectual mindset of authors who tried to make sense of the first wave of European colonization from the fifteenth century onwards. Yet, as argued in the contribution by Jitse Daniels, the practical development of European empire in this period – especially in Spanish America – more closely resembled the *provinciae* than the *coloniae* of Rome: conquered regions directed at exploitation through the extraction of natural resources and agricultural production for the European market. In these larger colonial structures, “colonies”, in the classical sense of settlements created by and for migrants from the metropole, developed into hybrid nodes of contact in an imperial system dominated by metropolitan elites who governed over large indigenous or deported enslaved communities.

The resulting ambiguity of the concept “colony” is revealed by the first use of the term in the Dutch context. At the start of the seventeenth century, Willem Usselinx, a self-assured businessman who had spent his formative years in Spain and who is generally considered the first colonial thinker of the Dutch Republic, used the Spanish term *colonias* to argue for a military and commercial strategy of piercing through Spanish dominion by establishing Dutch settlements in the Americas (Usselinx [1608]). These colonies, Usselinx claimed, would not only undermine the global power of the Spanish monarchy. They would essentially function as centres for the profitable trade in American produce and as gateways to indigenous markets for the export of Dutch manufactured goods. The most striking aspect of this proposal is the emphasis on commerce instead of land: for Usselinx, colonies primarily serve as commercial hubs, not as agricultural settlements. While his thinking betrays a strong indebtedness to the classical colonial narrative, emphasizing the alleged industriousness of Dutch labourers and their opportunities to make a more profitable living as colonists overseas, Usselinx clearly departs from the classical emphasis on agricultural labour and landed property, adopting instead a commercial focus on maritime enterprise and moveable goods. In this narrative, the classical language of emancipation not only concerns the prospective Dutch colonists but also the indigenous peoples,



who, in Usselinx' self-congratulatory colonial delusion, would happily accept Dutch intruders to regain their freedom from Spanish dominion and to make a nice profit from entering the global marketplace.

What we see here is an intellectual shift that, while retaining the colonial terminology and mindset bequeathed by antiquity, involves a different interpretation of the meaning of ownership and its connection with power – in short, of the link between property and sovereignty. This shift is represented most clearly by the famous Dutch humanist scholar Hugo Grotius. In the years that Usselinx developed his proposal for commercial colonization in the Americas, Grotius turned his attention towards Asia, putting his knowledge in the service of the VOC, the Dutch East India Company established in 1602. Widely read in Greek and Roman history, philosophy, and literature, Grotius sought to weaponize classical examples to promote a colonial agenda not in the sense of public agricultural settlements but in the sense of private commercial enterprise. Employing Stoic philosophy together with Roman law – arguably the most important institutional legacy of the classical world – he argued that human beings are defined by their desire for self-preservation, and hence have a right and a duty to seize all the resources that are necessary to preserve themselves (see esp. Straumann 2015). This implies, for Grotius, that property is the result of individual agency, not of state intervention (for example through distribution). Individuals seize things and own them by using them, thus establishing property of things over which they hold no prior authority. In other words, property is not derived from sovereignty, but predates it: first you take a thing, you claim your right over it by using it, and only then you can claim authority over it. Persons and things therefore have a direct relationship unmediated by the state. If anything, the state originates to protect individual property rights.

Grotius' understanding of the origins of property and its relationship with sovereignty inverted the classical colonial legacy in three ways. First, it prioritized a focus on moveable goods that can easily be seized for individual use (i.e. consumer items), instead of the classical focus on pre-owned immovable goods (i.e. land). Second, this focus on moveable goods highlighted the possibility of transferring property rights (i.e. commercial exchange), instead of the classical framework in which territory must be conquered and settled in order to be claimed and distributed. Third, the emphasis on individual agency in establishing property rights opened the way for non-state organizations to act as colonial agents, seizing property without the need to claim sovereignty. Hence, the classical paradigm of settler colonialism effectively developed into what has recently been typified as “venture colonialism”: building empire through private enterprise (Stern 2023).

The VOC, the semi-state corporation in the service of which Grotius developed his theory, can be characterized as a prime example of such venture colonialism. As a state-sponsored company sustained by private capital, the VOC combined commerce and warfare, business and violence, to intrude in Asian trading networks, trying to establish a monopoly on consumer goods (especially spices)



for the European market. Claiming state-like sovereign prerogatives, the VOC concluded treaties and established settlements not with the aim to occupy and distribute land but to control transregional and transoceanic trading routes through commercial agreements and strategically positioned fortresses populated by only a few officials. The aim and the result hereof was not absolute sovereignty, but rather fragmented sovereignty: a colonial landscape in which indigenous state structures largely remained in place but were pierced through by small spots of VOC power that operated beyond state control. Instead of seizing indigenous lands and shipping settlers overseas, the VOC seized produce and shipped it to Europe. Its rationale, in short, was to move things, not people. If the VOC moved people, it considered these people things: slaves (mostly originating from South Asia) that could be captured, sold, or exploited at will.

The difference between this form of venture colonialism and classically inspired settler colonialism is illustrated by the VOC's eliminatory policies. The most well-known example hereof is the annihilation of the inhabitants of the Maluku island of Banda Lontor in 1621. The decision to exterminate the island's population, taken by VOC governor-general Jan Pieterszoon Coen, was not instigated by a settler colonial drive to seize indigenous territory, but rather by the ambition to eradicate indigenous obstruction to monopolistic commercial enterprise (specifically the cultivation and trade of nutmeg). Extrapolating from this example, it could be argued that venture colonialism and settler colonialism share a comparable logic of elimination but with a different purpose: while the settler colonist annihilates for the sake of sovereignty, to claim authority over indigenous land, the venture colonist annihilates for the sake of property, to claim ownership of indigenous goods.

The colony of Batavia, established in 1619 upon the ruins of Jacatra after a war waged by the VOC under Coen against the local sultan, typifies the way in which this venture colonial framework absorbed the classical colonial legacy. From its very foundation, Batavia did not serve as a colonial base for expanding imperial sovereignty through the occupation and settlement of land. Instead, it served as a headquarters to expand maritime colonial enterprise, tying together the various nodes that formed the hybrid VOC empire in the Indian Ocean basin, from the Cape to Maluku. European settlers only constituted a very small part of Batavia's population, which mainly consisted of enslaved communities and Chinese migrants. Tellingly, in line with the classical colonial language of liberty, there was continuous discussion on how the few European colonists in Batavia could be emancipated – but the answer provided hinged upon commerce, not on territory: colonists, the argument ran, should not be granted a plot of land but free trade privileges. As Chastelein argued in 1705 (Chastelein 1885, 64): "Colonists should have the freedom they desire to transport and trade their crops and merchandise wherever they want." Emancipation supposedly came through freely competing in the global market, not through the equal distribution of land. Finally, in relation to classical colonial mythologies,



Batavia's very name reflected the significance of mythological foundational narratives in the development of venture colonialism, yet with a significant twist. While the name Batavia clearly meant to engrain a humanist mythology of freedom and self-rule (the so-called Batavian myth) in the colonial landscape, this mythology did not presuppose an origin story of mass-migration, but rather of firmly rooted non-Roman independence.

This is not to say that the classical colonial language of migration and territorial settlement was altogether absent from VOC thinking and policymaking. Significant in this regard is that VOC governor-general Coen initially wanted to call Batavia "Nieuw-Hoorn", thus presupposing a duplication of his Dutch hometown Hoorn on colonial soil. Indeed, Coen continuously sought to increase the influx of European colonists to Batavia, which clearly revealed his indebtedness to settler colonial thinking. As Dinah Wouters shows in her contribution, similar arguments continued to be raised by VOC officials in Batavia throughout the seventeenth century. Claims to land also surfaced in the transgenerational making of colonial identity narratives in British America, as discussed by Mark Thompson. Yet the fact that these settler arguments and narratives were largely eclipsed by more structural factors in the rise of global capitalism showed that commerce, not territory, steered the making of modern colonialism.

In this process, venture colonialism progressively absorbed settler colonialism, asserting itself as the primary logic. Also in cases of domestic colonization, such as in the example of the nineteenth-century Netherlands explored by Maarten Zwiers, private corporations (in this case, the Society of Benevolence) took precedence over state initiatives. A similar argument can be made for the context of the early twentieth-century Levant, where, as evidenced in the contribution by Karène Sanchez-Summerer, non-state corporate actors such as the Jewish Colonisation Association shaped the power dynamics in which colonial intermediaries operated in the absence of clearly defined state authority. And arguably the clearest example of the ongoing dominance of the venture colonial paradigm is the role of some of today's largest private corporations – specifically Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin and Elon Musk's SpaceX – in fantasies of outer space settlement. As argued by Clemens Six in his contribution, plans for the colonisation of outer space rekindle deeply rooted settler colonial tropes, including the notion of virgin land, the prospect of attaining absolute sovereignty, the creation of a new social order and the dream of unlimited resource extraction (see also Fitzmaurice 2025).

Yet as long as the colonization of space remains not much more than a future mirage, the concrete policies of these corporate agents on earthly soil are at least equally revealing. Take for example the creation of Starbase, the SpaceX headquarters in Texas. Initially developed as a production location and launch facility, Starbase has recently been turned into an independent city with the aim to outmanoeuvre federal state control. In many ways, this initiative exemplifies the much wider phenomenon of the creation in recent decades of "special zones" – small hubs such as tax-free havens,



governed by laws and regulations different from those of the surrounding territory and primarily designed for attracting mobile investment (Slobodian 2023). These zones perforate state sovereignty and essentially function as colonies for venture capital, unburdened by democratic oversight. It is not absolute sovereignty that this form of colonialism seeks to attain, but rather the fragmentation of sovereignty. It is not land it seeks to acquire, but the accumulation of moveable property. It is not settlers it attracts, but capital. Starbase, in short, is not an example of settler colonialism but of venture colonialism. Far removed from the preoccupations of the classical colonial mindset, it essentially reincarnates the model of seventeenth-century commercial colonization. Starbase is the new Batavia.



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