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# Settler colonialism and decolonisation

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# Settler colonialism and decolonisation

## **Abstract**

Appraising the evolution of settler colonial forms during the second half of the twentieth century can contribute to an appraisal of decolonisation processes. This is both because settler colonial forms have existed in a variety of sites of European colonial expansion (and have survived in a number of postcolonial polities), and because, contrary to other colonial forms, settler colonialism has been remarkably resistant to decolonisation. This article calls for integrating two non-communicating discursive fields: adding an appraisal of settler colonialism to discussions of decolonisation, and introducing decolonisation to analyses of settler colonial contexts. It briefly outlines a history of decolonizing settler colonial structures, and it reflects on the intellectual and historiographical shifts that have accompanied these processes. This paper also suggests that an appraisal of a narrative deficit - a specific difficulty associated with conceptualising settler decolonisation - can contribute to explaining widespread reluctance in enacting meaningful postcolonial passages.

## **Keywords**

colonialism, settler, decolonisation

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**Settler Colonialism and Decolonisation**

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*Appraising the evolution of settler colonial forms during the second half of the twentieth century can contribute to an appraisal of decolonisation processes. This is both because settler colonial forms have existed in a variety of sites of European colonial expansion (and have survived in a number of postcolonial polities), and because, contrary to other colonial forms, settler colonialism has been remarkably resistant to decolonisation. This article calls for integrating two non-communicating discursive fields: adding an appraisal of settler colonialism to discussions of decolonisation, and introducing decolonisation to analyses of settler colonial contexts. It briefly outlines a history of decolonizing settler colonial structures, and it reflects on the intellectual and historiographical shifts that have accompanied these processes. This paper also suggests that an appraisal of a narrative deficit - a specific difficulty associated with conceptualising settler decolonisation - can contribute to explaining widespread reluctance in enacting meaningful postcolonial passages.*

**Introduction**

1. Appraising the evolution of settler colonial forms during the second half of the twentieth century can contribute to an exploration of decolonisation processes. This is both because settler colonialism has existed in an extraordinary variety of sites of European colonial expansion (and a number of postcolonial polities) and because, contrary to other types of colonial practice, settler colonialism has been in many ways remarkably resistant to decolonisation. As historian of settler colonial social formations Patrick Wolfe has remarked, "settler colonialism is relatively impervious to regime change" (Wolfe 2006, 402).

2. There is a growing historical literature dealing with settler colonialism as separate from other colonial phenomena (i.e. a circumstance where outsiders come to stay and establish territorialised sovereign political orders). Indeed, settler colonialism as an interpretative category has witnessed a noticeable resurgence in recent years (see, for example, Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis 1995, Russell 2001, Evans et al 2003, Weaver 2003, Elkins and Pedersen 2005). More analytical works on the structures of settler colonial formations have also appeared (Wolfe 1999, Wolfe 2001, Moses 2005), and a major international conference dedicated to these issues was held in June 2007.[1] At the same time, a number of edited collections and monographs have contributed to a remarkable growth in the historiography of decolonisation (see, for example, Duara 2003, Le Sueur 2003, Betts 2004, Shipway 2005, Rothermund 2006). The decolonisation of settler colonial phenomena, however, has been largely neglected by this revival, even if, as Todd Shepard has convincingly argued in *The Invention of Decolonization*, settler colonialism and decolonisation are intimately linked (Shepard 2006). Indeed, scholarly research on decolonisation has rarely addressed the ways in which settler colonial regimes have been discontinued (or reformed, or reproduced), or looked beyond the countries settled and colonised under the British law (i.e. the 'colonies of settlement', where a coherent cluster of British legal traditions was introduced with the extension of colonial sovereignty [Karsten 2002]). Introducing his article on the specific character of Australian settler colonialism, Anthony Moran, for example, lamented the fact that literatures on decolonisation have traditionally neglected settler colonialisms and their specific structures and forms (Moran 2002, 1013, see also Lynes 2002).

3. This neglect mirrors previous contestations involving the possibility and advisability of including settler colonial 'postcolonialities' (however we may define them) within postcolonial discourse.[2] While in their theoretical approach to settler colonialism Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson have called for what they defined as "settler postcolonial theory" as a response to a debate that had programmatically excluded settler colonial polities (Lawson 1995, Johnston and Lawson 2000), this non-communication also confirms the difficulties associated with positioning settler colonialism's inherent ambivalence in the

context of wider analyses of colonial phenomena (i.e. being European and non-European, deliberately establishing new lifestyles and ostensibly reproducing old ones, being colonised and colonising at the same time, etc.). Moreover, and perhaps more dangerously, by failing to address what Canadian Indigenous leader George Manuel perceptively defined as the 'Fourth World' (i.e. Indigenous communities within sovereign independent polities), and despite a declared comprehensiveness and critical approach, recent reflections on decolonisation have left quite a few exceptionally colonised peoples out of the interpretative picture (Manuel 1974). Indeed, a strictly defined subject area partition ends up reproducing a typically colonial articulation distinguishing between 'colony of settlement' and 'colony of exploitation'. Exclusion and lack of critical approach do not augur well for advancing a scholarship that is fully aware of the necessity of moving beyond colonialism and its discursive practices.

4. It is not only the historical experiences of Indigenous peoples in white settler nations that remain overlooked, however; much more goes missing. Dietmar Rothermund's *Routledge Companion to Decolonization*, for example, avoids referring to South Africa because "it attained its independence before the period of post-war decolonization" (Rothermund 2006, 177). While this allows a disavowal of black and other South Africans' twentieth century struggles against colonialism, introducing his *Companion*, Rothermund also excises colonial and postcolonial studies and their concerns from the scope of his analysis by noting dismissively that "these studies have ended up in the rarified atmosphere of 'discourse analysis'" (Rothermund 2006, 2). Of course, and this is perhaps the point, as well as ignoring many colonised peoples and their struggles, treating settler colonialism as separate from decolonisation enables a disavowal of many colonisers and their practices, allowing for 'colonialism' to be perceived as something generally perpetrated by someone else. And yet, calls to supersede this rigid disciplinary separation are not new. In the introduction to an edited collection of documents outlining the emergence of the 'Fourth World', Roger Moody reconstructs how he became progressively interested in Indigenous issues during the 1960s, after it had become apparent that the Cold War, national liberation processes and struggles, and decolonisation in general were bypassing a number of 'forgotten' people who could not make their struggles visible (Moody 1993, xix-xxiv; on the emergence of Indigenism, see Niezen 2003). In the end, it seems that Indigenous peoples' ongoing struggles for visibility may yet have to overcome a number of conceptual blockages associated with an inclination to separate 'First' and 'Third' Worlds in ways that do not allow for Indigenous autonomy, or for the ways in which Indigenous populations often straddle these categories. At any rate, while the historiography of decolonisation seems to have forgotten them, Indigenous peoples have certainly not forgotten decolonisation and have collectively and recurrently demanded acknowledgement of their inherent sovereignties.

5. This article calls for integrating two non-communicating disciplinary fields: adding an appraisal of settler colonialism to discussions of decolonisation, and introducing the issue of decolonisation in analyses of settler colonial contexts ("a call for interdisciplinary dialogue, of course, does not necessarily constitute a criticism of these separate literatures: indeed, their respective relevance, which includes, for example, a remarkable scholarship on the experiences of Indigenous peoples in white settler nations begs the question of *why* they could not interact). The first section of this article briefly outlines a typology of decolonisation of settler colonial structures; the second reflects on the intellectual and historiographical shifts that have accompanied and underpinned some of these processes. The latter part also compares recent historiographical shifts in a number of settler polities and suggests that an appraisal of a narrative deficit - a specific difficulty associated with conceptualising settler decolonisation - can contribute to explaining reluctance in enacting meaningful postcolonial/decolonising passages.

### Decolonising Settler Colonialisms

6. Settler colonialism and decolonisation were bound to interact in an especially complex fashion. In distinguished historian of colonial Africa Ronald Robinson's terms, the white settler was the "ideal prefabricated collaborator" of imperial and colonial regimes (Robinson 1972), and Frantz Fanon insisted in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the true enemy of the colonised is the European settler (Fanon 1967, especially 27-74). In Africa, it was in the settler colonies - in Algeria, but also in Kenya, Southern Rhodesia, and Angola and Mozambique - that decolonisation became an especially brutal process. Coming from very different perspectives, both these intuitions emphasise that settlers carry colonialism 'in their bones', and forecast that settler colonial forms may ultimately prove unreformable.

7. Two decolonising waves engulfed Africa at two very different times. The first 1950s/1960s wave included most locales where European settlers had not been established - with the exception of Algeria and Kenya, which had witnessed bitter anticolonial insurgencies. A later wave peaked between 1975 and 1980, comprising Mozambique and Angola and Zimbabwe. One can detect a clear pattern of delayed decolonisation associated with the presence *in situ* and influence in the metropole of European settlers.

8. The Fourth World also witnessed a delayed pattern of decolonisation. However,

approaching a decolonisation of white settler societies *vis à vis* Indigenous constituencies has proved comparatively more complex than granting sovereign national attributes to postcolonial successor states. In settler colonial polities, as Iris Marion Young has remarked, an "institutional imagination" of an entirely new character had to be developed, and this often proved much more difficult than originally envisaged (Young 2000). If one includes Indigenous peoples in this frame, 'decolonisation' may then have a much longer history than the available literature may suggest. Decolonisation is generally understood as a global transition of states and societies from foreign rule to sovereign status; in the case of Indigenous groups achieving a degree of self-determination, however, sovereignty was and is negotiated *within* a polity rather than *between* polities.[3] During the last few decades and, again, following a very complex course characterised by local variations and timing, there has been a worldwide shift in Indigenous discourse from a politics of equal dignity amongst individuals to a politics of difference (see Taylor 1994). In related developments and in a number of different polities, from South Africa to Latin America, from the French Overseas Territories to the Canadian Commonwealth, processes of national/Indigenous reconciliation were also initiated. Throughout these processes a range of different approaches dealing with Indigenous constituencies and unsundered sovereignties were eventually developed: instances of constitutional reforms and enabling legislation include the 'Waitangi Movement' in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the establishment of Nunavut and a renewed tradition of treaty making in other areas of Canada, the Mabo and Wik court decisions in Australia, the Matignon and Noumea Accords regarding New Caledonia and many others.

9. This is, however, a truly global phenomenon, as confirmed by the September 2007 UN declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and its assertion of Indigenous self-determination (an assertion, however, carefully respective of the sovereignty of existing states [Davis 2007]). As noted by United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of Indigenous peoples Rodolfo Stavenhagen, many other countries have adopted major legal or constitutional revisions concerning Indigenous peoples and their rights during the 1980s and 1990s. These include Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela in Latin America, the Philippines, Japan, Norway, Denmark, and Russia elsewhere (Stavenhagen 2003). While to this list one should include the transition to post-apartheid South Africa, even China's newly revised Law of Nationality Regional Autonomy (2001) states (article 118) that "In exploiting natural resources [which according to Article 9 are owned by the state] and building enterprises in the national autonomous areas the state shall give due consideration to the interests of those areas" (quoted in Bulag 2002, 230 n. 46). The election of an Indigenous president in Bolivia by a mainly Indigenous constituency and a recurrent capacity of Indigenous organisations in other Latin American locales to shape political processes may also confirm a long lasting decolonising trend. (However, multiple processes may be at stake: while distinguished scholar of Cuban history Richard Gott has recently called for deploying settler colonialism as an interpretative category in studies of Latin America [Gott 2006], a progressive narrative of delayed but ultimately developing decolonisation for the Fourth World should be associated with a worrying pattern of retrenchment and backlash [see, for example, Stewart-Harawira 2005]).

10. Broadly speaking, one can detect three general experiences of settler decolonisation: settler evacuation, the promotion of various processes of Indigenous reconciliation, and denial associated with an explicit rejection of the possibility of reforming the settler body politic. Indigenous issues have also at times been subsumed within wider multicultural orders; and yet, as many scholars have noted, these processes recurrently allowed for further discontinuation of Indigenous status/autonomy/claims, hardly a decolonising development (see, for example, Moran 2002, 1014, 1015). Of course, while these three possibilities are conceptually autonomous and are addressed separately for analytical purposes, it should be emphasised that they have often overlapped and intertwined in complex ways.

11. As Fanon perceptively noted, "the settler, from the moment the colonial context disappears, has no longer an interest in remaining or in co-existing" (Fanon 1967, 35). Not that settlers necessarily go together and at once; there are varied patterns of departure and different accommodations with nationalist movements taking over at the moment of decolonisation. Of course, the reverse process is also possible and at times it is the community of settlers that is eventually expelled by nationalist forces. Soon after taking control of Libya in the late 1960s Colonel Gaddafi threw out the remaining Italian community. In a dense commemorative calendar and in a split fashion that underlines an inherent distinction between two colonial regimes, Libya celebrates independence day to mark the end of a colonial sovereignty, and 'Evacuation of Fascist Settlers Day' to symbolise an ultimate break with a *settler* colonial past (see Zerubavel 2003, 30). Settler minorities, however, often end up leaving. While they do want to stay, even more, they want a colonial and settler colonial world to remain in place. On the other hand, faced with the stark choice of discontinuing a cluster of colonial links with the metropole, or discontinuing settler colonial relationships *vis à vis* Indigenous peoples, settler collectives recurrently prefer to maintain the latter, as demonstrated by settler coups in Algiers, the unilateral

declaration in Rhodesia, etc.

12. Quite significantly, however, where decolonisation takes the form of a settler collective exodus, as happened in Algeria, Libya, Kenya, Angola, Mozambique, North and South Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, South West Africa/Namibia, and more recently, in the Gaza Strip (evacuated of Israeli settlers, but not yet of colonial control), the decolonisation of territory is not matched, even symbolically, by an attempt to build decolonised relationships. Indeed, settler departure conceptually mirrors and reinforces settler colonialism's inherent exclusivism, and confirms a 'winner takes all' settler colonial frame of mind that demands that settler sovereignties entirely replace Indigenous ones (or vice versa).[4] By denying the very possibility of a relation between coloniser and colonised after the discontinuation of a settler colonial regime, settler departure produces a circumstance where decolonisation cannot even conceptually be construed as a relationship between formally (yet not substantively) equal subjects.

13. If settler colonialism in locales where the population economy consisted of variously defined white minorities could not afford decolonisation, in white settler nations, it was exodus that was never (and quite luckily) an option.[5] Whereas settler polities are often characterised by a marked uneasiness in explicitly breaking away from colonial relationships (approaching a history of twentieth century New Zealand, for example, historian James Belich even refers to "recolonisation" as a suitable interpretative category [Belich 2001, 283-287]), throughout the 1970s and 1980s many of these polities were facing contradictions arising from their encompassing a number of unreconciled "nations within" (Fleras and Elliott 1992).

14. Ann Curthoys's intuition that Australia is colonial and postcolonial, and colonising and decolonising at the same time could apply to a number of settler polities and underscores a situation where postcolonial passages remain ambiguous (Curthoys 2000; see also Bird Rose 2004, Moreton Robinson 2003). Indeed, while how, when and if Australia, Canada and New Zealand have decolonised is a matter of contention, in the US the colonial issue is generally understood as definitively settled by 1783 (and perhaps reopened in 1898, but only as 'an aberration'), which tends to pre-empt an appraisal of a couple of hundred years of settler colonisation. If a settler colonial condition is characterised by being at the same time colonised and colonising, a focus on external relations and sovereign independence or autonomous self rule against a colonising metropolitan centre inevitably obscures the position of internally colonised Indigenous constituencies.

15. In white settler nations, a number of political processes, each envisaging a variously defined post-settler compact, were initiated. Projects of national or Indigenous reconciliation developed in dramatically different political circumstances and produced varied results; and yet, despite this diversity, these initiatives collectively represent a possible type of postcolonial institutional endeavour in settler societies (see, for example, Havemann 1999, Ivson, Patton and Sanders 2000, Langton 2004, Pearson 2001, and Pearson 2002). Nonetheless, even partially reforming the settler structures of the body politic, usually under the impulse of judicially led reforms endorsing constitutional and legislative transformation, has proved painstakingly difficult, has encountered increasing opposition, and was eventually reversed in some jurisdictions, as, for example, the 1998 amendments to the Native Title Act in Australia confirm.[6]

16. Besides exodus and a variety of political processes aimed at establishing post-settler compacts, a third circumstance should be considered, where the very detection of the colonising structures of the settler colonial polity, let alone the possibility of their discontinuation, was never placed on public agendas: Israel and the US, for example.[7] In his analysis of the evolution of US hegemony, Giovanni Arrighi recently referred to Gareth Stedman Jones' suggestion that the US did not initiate settler colonial traditions overseas because *it was* a settler colonial order:

American historians who speak complacently of the absence of the settler-type colonialism characteristic of the European powers merely conceal the fact that the whole *internal* history of United States imperialism was one vast process of territorial seizure and occupation. The absence of territorialism 'abroad' was founded on an unprecedented territorialism 'at home' (Stedman Jones quoted in Arrighi 2005, 103 n. 40, emphasis in the original ).

17. Similarly, Israel could celebrate its anticolonial/anti-British struggle exactly because it was able to establish a number of colonial relationships within and without the borders of 1948.[8] (On the other hand, it should be noted that in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, besides ongoing denial and repression, the remaining possibilities remain potentially available [i.e. the prospect of a future evacuation of settlers from areas of the West Bank, and accommodation of a Palestinian Israeli autonomy within the institutions of the Israeli state; see Veracini 2006]). While in these polities the invisibility of imperial and colonising endeavours has remained conventional thinking, the prospect of enacting post-settler decolonising passages *vis à vis* Indigenous peoples remains unlikely.

### Imagining Settler Decolonisations

18. Imagining the decolonisation of settler colonial forms can be challenging. If settler colonialism is an ambivalent circumstance where the settler is colonised and colonising at once, decolonisation requires at least two moments: the moment of settler independence and the moment of Indigenous self-determination. One passage is easily conceptualised; the other is yet to come. Moreover, 'Decolonisation' in settler contexts is further complicated by the fact that one decolonisation (settler independence) inevitably constitutes an acceleration of colonising practices at the other end. This is why processes of constitutional rearrangement involving Indigenous constituencies in settler nations have necessitated a significant revision of traditional historical narratives and a comprehensive reinterpretation of national and/or territorial pasts. Indeed, the role of historians in contributing to institutional and judicial readjustment has in some cases been decisive (see, for example, Reynolds 1999, Ward 1999). Historians, and other academics involved in the production of Indigenous histories, have in some cases made history by, literally, rewriting it. Inevitably, as historical revisions challenged entrenched foundational narratives, these revisionisms have often engendered a counterpoint view. In response to these revisions, a defensive 'settler' type of historical discourse has also reappeared. Australia's 'History Wars' epitomise these developments (see Manne 2003, Macintyre and Clark 2003).

19. However, constitutional rearrangements typically promoted historiographies where an evolving partnership *in the present* would find confirmation in specific representations of pre or non-settler colonial pasts. In a reforming Aotearoa/New Zealand during the 1980s and 1990s an historiographical upgrading of ostensibly discontinued traditions of partnership underpinned a general process aimed at establishing 'treaty' practices as a way to address historical grievances (see Veracini 2001). While in the context of a discussion of Aotearoa/New Zealand's attempts at rectifying the past W. H. Oliver has even talked about "retrospective utopia" (Oliver 2001), a similar 'inscription' of treaty traditions was also initiated in an Australian context (by Henry Reynolds in *The Law of The Land*, as insightfully pointed out by Bain Attwood, who referred to it as an example of as "juridical history") (Attwood 2004:1, Reynolds 1987; on 'juridical history' see Sharp 2001).[9]

20. South Africa's transition to post-apartheid also produced a dramatically changing historiographical landscape, where the historiography of the northern frontier witnessed a remarkable acceleration, possibly because it provided an example of an original multiethnic, hybrid, and 'open' (and previously neglected) frontier setting. Significantly, Nigel Penn noted in his historiographical outline that "the widespread acceptance of the election results of 1994 has begun a process of the rolling back, or opening, of frontiers everywhere".[10] "It is possible that an 'open' frontier situation, as existed in the northern frontier zone for so long, will be seen as being the more typical South African scenario after all", he concluded (Penn 2001, 39). In North America a renewed historiographical tradition emphasising frontier exchange and a long lasting 'middle ground' underpinned evolving contemporary relations between Indian nations and settler polities (see, for example, White 1991, Nelson Limerick 2000, Countryman 1996, Perry 2005). However, considering a history of Indigenous extinction, removal and subordination, couldn't a focus on the 'middle ground' be also understood as one form of 'retrospective utopia'?

21. In Australia, a window of opportunity for approaching a post-settler passage was provided, as Wolfe perceptively noted in his unpacking of the Mabo decision, by assuming that since Indigenous dispossession had not been enacted in the Torres Strait Islands this may apply to mainland Australia as well (Wolfe 1999, 202). In this circumstance, the legal structure of a non-settler colonial order was thus conceptually imported to a settler colonial context. Later formulations of 'the tide of history' as justifying Aboriginal dispossession in the context of a post-1992 unavailability of *terra nullius* reveal the inherent limits of an approach unaware of the structural differences between two colonial regimes (see Buchan 2002). One should note as well that in Australia the alternative and more distressing (and yet potentially more rewarding) attempt to face a sorrowful history, as epitomised by the 'Bringing them Home' report, was ultimately discontinued (see Schaffer and Smith 2004).

22. As these examples suggest, while history and historical discourse are crucial to all these trajectories, the historiographical shifts that have underpinned partially decolonising settler societies have generally produced a situation where non-settler colonial pasts were upgraded and retroactively mobilised in order to sustain the possibility of renewed postcolonial compacts. Despite these transformations, however, the reforming settler polities of the 1980s and 1990s share historiographical debates where a settler colonial past was displaced rather than addressed, and the determinations of a settler colonial present avoided rather than decolonised. In the end, an emphasis on alternative traditions of settler-Indigenous partnership has been easier than insisting on the need to decolonise settler colonial sovereignties, and a widespread disinclination to enact substantive decolonising ruptures resulted in a tendency to avoid disturbing the foundational determinants of settler colonial polities. Foundational settler narratives were ultimately resilient and an acknowledgment that 'settlement' establishes legitimacies without extinguishing Indigenous ones and that these sovereignties need to be ultimately accommodated in a decolonising post-settler move has remained elusive.



23. How can this interpretative incapacity be explained? Can an historiographical impasse be associated with a lack of a suitable narrative of settler decolonisation? One constitutive difference between colonialism and settler colonialism is that while colonial regimes are geared towards the perpetuation of their colonial character (i.e. a continuation of the coloniser-colonised divide), settler colonialism endeavours to fully supersede all its colonial determinants (i.e. to 'close' frontiers, extinguish Indigenous autonomy, establish independent nationhood, etc.). Discontinuation of a colonial regime always remains within the available conceptual possibilities; on the contrary, discontinuation of a settler colonial regime remains unthinkable beyond an extinguishment by way of its ultimate fulfilment (i.e. a final discontinuation and/or assimilation of autonomous Indigenous subjectivities and claims). Colonial narratives normally take a circular form: an *Odyssey* consisting of an outward movement followed by interaction with exotic locales and peoples, and by a final return to an original locale. On the contrary, as settlers come to stay, narratives associated with settler colonial enterprises resemble an *Aeneid*, where the coloniser moves forward along a story line that cannot be turned back. This structural difference expresses an intractable distance between colonial and settler colonial narrative forms that does have an impact on the ways in which decolonisation can be conceptualised.

24. Indeed, there *is* an acceptable narrative of decolonisation for the Third World centred around nation-building and economic development, irrespective of whether this actually happens (it very rarely does). This format of postcolonial history can be applied either as a progressive narrative of independence and nation-building (i.e. there is *some* fit between this narrative and reality), or as a more sobering denunciation of neo-colonialism and state failure (i.e. there is *no* fit between this narrative and reality). Either way, getting out of the colonies could be represented as a 'forward' movement (a circular narrative form allows one to proceed forward even when one is going back). Conversely, in settler colonial contexts, withdrawing from colonial practices of Indigenous dispossession could only be perceived as a 'backward' movement signalling the demise of original settler claims (a linear narrative form does not allow much scope for reform). Lacking the possibility of a clearly defined decolonising moment, settler colonial contexts retained the policy objectives, if not the methods, of their colonising pasts (i.e. further extinction and/or assimilation of Indigenous law, tenure, autonomy, and identity).

25. There is still no intuitive/acceptable narrative of settler colonial decolonisation, and/or Indigenous/national reconciliation. When and if Indigenous communities are finally acknowledged, given access to native title, and perhaps receive an apology and some compensation (all necessary elements of any genuinely post-settler/postcolonial compact), the widespread pattern of perception is that of a sovereignty inherently subversive of settler/national foundations.[11] In the context of a settler colonial mentality, the very presence of Indigenous peoples is normally unsettling; but an acknowledgement of their sovereignty is even more so. As long as there are no available narratives of settler decolonisation, a cluster of narrative structures identifying Indigenous dispossession and loss of collective autonomy as 'progress' is bound to remain paradigmatic (this includes variously defined assimilations). As Bain Attwood perceptively noted, a settler history is by definition a history of Indigenous replacement where an end to settler colonial practices can only be interpreted as the end of history (Attwood 1996, 116).

26. If settler colonisation is an ultimate colonising act where settlers envisage no return, settler colonialism still tells a story of either total victory or total failure. Discontinuing settler colonial forms requires conceptual frames and supporting narratives of reconciliation that have yet to be fully developed and narrated. Nation-building in formerly colonised contexts can be difficult, but at least it can be conceptualised; enacting genuine post-settler passages in white settler nations is another matter. (As mentioned, multicultural remaking was comparatively easier to approach, as it does not involve unsettling foundational settler narratives. Multiculturalism allows for an expanded definition of who can claim belonging to the settler body politic that leaves settler colonial structures unchallenged).

27. As compellingly argued by Roger Louis, the scramble for colonies had produced colonial states that could be turned over to successor polities in a process of decolonising 'counter-scramble' symmetrical to the great imperial rush of the late nineteenth century (Roger Louis 2006, especially 1-31). This symmetry was not readily available, however, as regards settler colonial polities, where the 'great land rush' had located communities and national structures on the land. While a lack of decolonising options confirms Wolfe's argument that settler colonial invasion "is a structure not an event", it also suggests that it is the practical historical forms of different colonial regimes that determine the different modalities of their demise (Wolfe 1999, 163).

## Conclusion

28. There is an apparent connection associating a historiography of decolonisation and its strictly defined thematic boundaries with a tendency to emphasise non-settler pasts in settler contexts as a way to promote national or Indigenous reconciliation. In both cases it is a specific difficulty to imagine the shape and content of what decolonising settler colonial



structures would entail that may be at stake. There is yet no language of decolonisation pertaining to settler colonial contexts: when the focus is on decolonisation, settler colonialism remains off the radar; when settler colonialism as a specific colonial form is acknowledged, it is its decolonisation that is excised from the interpretative picture. A pattern of delayed and traumatic decolonisation, the difficulties associated with reforming settler polities and their structures, and a historiographical impasse indicate a marked incapacity to decolonise settler colonial forms.

29. Moreover, settler evacuation, as outlined in the first section of this article, does inform the ways in which debates on the legacies of settler colonial histories can be approached. It can work as trauma and shape policy, as happened in the case of New Caledonia/Kanaky, for example, where the necessity that the Algerian trauma would *not* be repeated was paramount in shaping French policy throughout the 1970s and 1980s (eventually, French authorities acceded to negotiations that would lead to the Matignon Accords of 1988), or as in the case of the 2005 evacuation of the Israeli settlements from the Gaza strip, where a national trauma was deliberately induced so that similar evacuations would not be repeated elsewhere. Alternatively, evacuation can work as a spectre, where calls for reforming the settler colonial body politic are routinely met by evocations of ultimate settler departure aimed at manipulating public perception. We were told, for example, that Mabo was about *vacating* suburban backyards.

30. Decolonising settler colonialism remains "unfinished business" (Hocking 2005). A number of contemporary mobilisations of settler colonial sensibilities could be mentioned: Australia is one example of a settler-determined context in which a tentative process aiming at a postcolonial passage became progressively stalled during the second half of the 1990s and was eventually reversed. Indeed, a comprehensive exhaustion of what could be understood as a 'judicial revolution' addressing native titles and sovereignties is a shared feature of other settler nations (i.e. Australia, Canada, Aotearoa/New Zealand - these themes exited public agendas much earlier in the US). While the decolonising wave of the 1960s did not immediately affect settler colonial formations, the reforming settler polities of the 1980s and 1990s could also revert to the 'colonising' practices of their pasts. These experiences confirm a situation in which decolonisation can only be effectively conceptualised in terms of decolonising territory. Decolonising relationships has proven much harder.

**Lorenzo Veracini is a postdoctoral fellow in the School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. He has written on the colonial features of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (*Israel and Settler Society*, Pluto Press, 2006) and is currently working on a global history of settler colonial forms. Email: Lorenzo.Veracini@anu.edu.au**

## Notes

[1] This was the Fifth Galway Conference on Colonialism. Abstracts and Conference Program are available at: [http://www.nuigalway.ie/centre\\_irish\\_studies/images/ProgrammeREAD.pdf](http://www.nuigalway.ie/centre_irish_studies/images/ProgrammeREAD.pdf) and [http://www.nuigalway.ie/centre\\_irish\\_studies/images/SettlerAbstracts.pdf](http://www.nuigalway.ie/centre_irish_studies/images/SettlerAbstracts.pdf) [both accessed: 12 July, 2007].

[2] Although they are terms charged with very different political attributes, and despite their belonging to quite different historiographical traditions, both 'decolonisation' and 'postcolonial' relate to 'colonial' by defining a *post quem* moment. Where 'decolonisation' emphasises discontinuity with a colonial past, 'postcolonial' stresses continuity.

[3] Or, as epitomised by a number of regional agreements with Indigenous communities in Australia, for example, within an even more localised framework (see Langton 2007).

[4] Other locales should be added in a complex and global history of postcolonial displacement involving discontinued settler communities: Shanghai, for example, as compellingly argued by Robert Bickers's history of its settler community (Bickers 1998).

[5] In a 1970s piece on Rhodesia, for example Kenneth Good perceptively remarked that settler colonialism "has no power to control change when real change begins to occur - to decolonize as did metropolitan colonialism in order to create a neo-colonial situation" (Good 1974, 10). In this context, however, one should note that the transition to post-apartheid South Africa constitutes a remarkable exception. Mahmood Mamdani, for example, authoritatively remarks that post-apartheid political processes constitute a development of "epochal significance [that] has set the political trajectory of the African continent on a course radically different from that of the Americas". "The Americas", he concludes, "is the continent of settler independence. The South African transition means that nowhere on this continent has a settler minority succeeded in declaring and sustaining the independence of a settler colony" (Mamdani 1998).

[6] More recently, the 2007 military intervention in Aboriginal communities in the Northern

Territory, associated with a number of all time classics of settler colonial practice (a renewed push for extinguishment of native title, individualization of property rights, and attacks on Aboriginal family life framed in the rhetoric of 'saving the children') confirms this pattern (see Altman and Hinkson 2007).

[7] As regards these polities, authoritative calls to introduce an awareness of settler colonial dynamics were issued by Ian Tyrrell, for example, who noted that embedding US history within transnational themes would be incomplete if the focus was its connections with Europe at the expense of other British settler societies, by Michael Adas in an compelling article on the need to move beyond American exceptionalism, and by Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis, who included Israel in their global analysis of settler societies (Tyrrell 2002, Adas 2001, Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis 1995).

[8] In a 1995 essay Alan Lawson, for example, insightfully noted that a focus on (settler) national independence allows a "strategic disavowal of the colonising act" and the transformation of 'invaders' into 'peaceful settlers':

In the foundations of [settler] cultural nationalism, then, we can identify one vector of difference (the difference between colonizing subject and colonized subject: settler-Indigene) being replaced by another (the difference between colonizing subject and imperial centre: settler-imperium) in a strategic disavowal of the colonizing act. The national is what replaces the indigenous and in doing so conceals its participation in colonization by nominating a new colonized subject - the colonizer or invader-settler" (Lawson 1995).

[9] Attwood saw Reynolds's intent as similar to what Eric Hobsbawm has referred to as "inventing tradition" (specifically, a moral tradition of respect for Indigenous property), and quotes Mark McKenna's remark that *The Law of the Land* 'uncovered what Australia's history "might have been" - a history of "perpetual possibility" - rather than a history of what was'; as good a definition as any of the construction of a tradition (McKenna quoted in Attwood 2004: 2) . The Keating government certainly legislated in the spirit of and in accordance with this 'invented tradition' (of course, 'invented traditions' can also be subsequently forgotten, as demonstrated by subsequent Aboriginal policies under Howard).

[10] It should be noted that the three possibilities outlined in the first section remain open as regards South Africa as well: exodus/migration (to Australia and other locales), genuine reconciliation, and withdrawal in Afrikaner 'homelands' and/or gated communities.

[11] Perceptively reflecting on the ambiguous status of indigenous sovereignty in relation to the American political system, Kevin Bruyneel recently recommended the articulation of a 'third space' of sovereignty as a decolonising move. This would be a 'concurrent' sovereign space, and a sovereignty that can exist "within and across the borders of the 'liberal democratic settler state and nation'" (2007: xvii).

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