
Originally published in Southern Perspectives.
Available from: http://www.southernperspectives.net/
Lorenzo Veracini on settler colonialism

Oct 22nd, 2010

‘Here from Elsewhere: Settlerism as a Platform for South-South Dialogue’

Discussion Roundtable, Institute for Postcolonial Studies, Melbourne, 21/10/10

Participants: James Belich, Lorenzo Veracini, Kate Darian Smith, Lorenzo Veracini

1) Settler colonialism as a compound category is an antipodean-developed paradigm. This origin makes it an important platform for South-South dialogue.

Actually placing “settlers” and “colonialism” in the same analytical field required overcoming a number of conceptual blockages. It took decades. The nineteenth century – the century of the “settler revolution” (see Belich 2009) – did not think that they could be compounded. Indeed the settler revolution had cleaved the two apart: Marx, who engaged extensively with Wakefield (see Pappe 1951), thought that the settler colonies were the only “colonies proper”; Mill, who wrote extensively on colonisation and colonialism kept them rigorously separate (see Bell 2010). Archibald Grenfell Price was probably the first, in 1929, to theorise a particular form of colonial activity distinct from other colonial endeavours. Settler driven colonialism – “independent” settlers – had been more effective colonisers than other metropole-directed groups (Price 1929). He was explaining South Australian specificities in the context of Australian diversity; and yet, he did not propose an exceptionalist account. On the contrary, his outlook was systematically comparative, proof that paradigmatic shifts are often grounded in parochial concerns.

I have elsewhere followed the development of “settler colonialism” as a concept since the 1930s (Veracini forthcoming). In the context of this trajectory, the notion that settler colonial settings were fundamentally different from both metropolitan and colonial contexts was recurrently proposed from the “South”. The settler themselves said so (the Algerian, Rhodesian, and south African settlers, for example, all at one point or another claimed a local version of southern exceptionalism), and the scholars, even if their agenda differed dramatically from the settlers’, confirmed it (i.e., Donald Denoon’s outline of settler capitalism in the southern hemisphere [1983], the “staple theory” of economic development that turns into a staple “trap” at the antipodes [see Schedvin 1990], Patrick Wolfe’s emphasis on the fundamental inapplicability in the specific conditions of settler colonialism of the master slave dyad typical of colonial studies [Wolfe 1999], and James Belich’s discovery, even if he does not use these terms, that settler colonialism is primarily about reproduction, not production, and that settler colonialism is immediately autonomous from the colonising metropole [2009]). Whether at the level of practice or theory, the notion that settler colonialism should be seen as a distinct formation came from the South.

That this was an original development and that only recently this notion has become better received in the northern hemisphere should be emphasised. On the contrary, scholarly traditions have consistently understood settler colonial phenomena either as colonial or metropolitan ones, not as an autonomous formation (alternatively, parochialising exceptionalist paradigms have been put forward). Marx and Engels, as mentioned, thought that settlers and metropole were part of the same analytical field. Lenin, and twentieth century Marxisms, on the contrary, conflated colonial and settler colonial forms and considered all colonialisms part of the general process of imperialist appropriation. Imperialism, it was argued, reorganised precapitalist economies anywhere, and integrated all peripheries into the world capitalist economy – the settler was, in Ronald Robinson’s words, the “ideal prefabricated collaborator” of imperialist endeavours (Robinson 1972). Likewise, anticolonial “Third Worldism” routinely collapsed the settler locales and the colonising metropole within the “global North” category, while only some within postcolonial studies preferred to include the settler colonies within the bounds of the “postcolonial” experience (even though this remained contentious and it was acknowledged that...
settler postcolonialities should be considered a specific subfield [see Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1989]).

2) Even if it remains an antipodean-developed paradigm, the applicability of settler colonialism has recently been expanded. Indeed, the indigenous/settler divide is now seen informing locales and experiences way beyond the settler Angloworld (see Belich 2009). This flexibility makes it a privileged platform for South-South dialogue.

Influential historians of Africa and Latin America Mahmood Mamdani and Richard Gott, for example, have convincingly deployed a settler colonial paradigm (Mamdani 1996, Mamdani 2001, Gott 2007; for a call to look for settler colonial phenomena beyond the “colonies of settlement”, see Edwards 2003). Both macroregions are generally considered as typically non-settler colonial. Africa and Latin America did not have the sustained economic development and political stability that settler colonialism, in marked contrast against colonial underdevelopment, would produce. Moreover, Africa did not have locales where white settlers constituted the majority of the population, and Latin America was inherently “hybrid”, it did not have the ethnic and racial homogeneity that typically characterises settler colonial formations.

Nonetheless, Mamdani extensively demonstrated how the postcolonial condition reverses but does not supersede a colonially determined relationship between “native” and “settler” (he defines a “settler” anyone who doesn’t have an ancestral homeland or lives outside his ancestral homeland). He outlined how in many postcolonial contexts dominated by nationalist regimes an indigenous ascendancy is enforced to the detriment of variously defined exogenous alterities (and how many of the intractable conflicts of postcolonial Africa depend on the inability/unwillingness to move beyond this dichotomy [Mamdani 2002, Mamdani 2009]).

Similarly, Gott noted how genocidal attacks against indigenous people in Latin America actually followed independence, not Spanish colonisation, and how recent political developments in the region can be interpreted as an indigenous renaissance in opposition to established settler colonial political orders. He thus proposed to fundamentally upturn received historical narratives of Latin America: settler colonialism, not independence or neo- or informal colonialism followed the end of formal colonial subjection.

3) But there is another way in which reflection on settler colonialism as a distinct formation can facilitate an original approach to South-South dialogue. Even if they prefer to imagine themselves operating in an empty setting, settlers inevitably displace indigenous peoples. Relatedly, even if they would like to free themselves from settler imposition, indigenous peoples operate within settler colonial orders. Settlerism and indigeneity coconstitute each other.

Francesca Merlan (2009) has recently proposed in an essay published in Current Anthropology a history of the emergence, consolidation and eventual internationalization of a global category comprising all indigenous collectivities since the 1920s (see also Niezen 2003). "International indigeneity", she noted, emerged in Scandinavia and in the Anglophone settler colonies and only eventually, indeed only very recently, became a truly global phenomenon. However, the “establishing” settler states did not support the ultimate institutionalization of indigeneity in international affairs, and voted as a bloc (CANZAUS) in 2007 against the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (see also Allen, Xanthaki 2010). This, Merlan argued, is a paradox that can be explained by reference to these countries’ liberal democratic political institutions. The “establishing” countries’ rejection of the Declaration “is consistent with the combination of enabling and constraining forces that liberal democratic political cultures offer” (303), she concluded. Liberal democratic political cultures allowed for the expression of indigenous political activism but eventually what could be construed as indigenous demands for special status clashed with a generalised reluctance to recognise the special claims of a particular constituency.

And yet, there is an alternative explanation beside Merlan’s sophisticated argument. If we define indigenous peoples as the “original inhabitants” of a particular locale, and considering that all
polities are one result of one type or another of different processes of military and demographic expansion, the permanence of indigenous peoples is a possibility that equally characterises metropolitan, colonial and settler colonial contexts. However, only if we realise that “indigeneity” has its roots in settler colonialism, that “indigeneity” is a relational category that acquires its full meaning when it is paralleled by its dialectical counterpart – the non indigenous settler (Fanon famously noted that “it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence” [1967: 36]) – we can better understand why it was the settler polities that voted against the Declaration. Only in the context of what I have elsewhere defined as the settler colonial “situation” there is a permanent distinction between an indigenous and an indigenising exogenous collective (see Veracini 2010).

Metropolitan and postcolonial polities could more easily accommodate the Declaration’s terms than settler polities whose current sovereign dimension is fundamentally premised on the original dispossession of indigenous peoples. Crucially, if the colonial relation fundamentally defines both metropole and colony (and their postcolonial successors), it does so in terms of externality: colonialism is something done somewhere else (i.e., the colonies), or by someone else (i.e., exogenous colonizers). In the metropole and in the colony, it is this externality can ultimately sustain a claim to indigeneity (if colonialism is extraneous to the polity, and if colonialism can be defined as a form of intergroup domination characterised by an exogenous ascendancy [as Ronald Horvath had proposed in another Current Anthropology article in 1972], the polity is indigenous by definition). However, this claim is impossible in the case of the settler colonies/societies, where colonialism is performed on the spot and by the settler, and where in any case there is no specific moment inaugurating a post-settler colonial predicament. Thus, whereas the Declaration is a largely irrelevant text in metropolitan and postcolonial settings, these can comfortably claim to be indigenous polities, it constitutes a potential challenge to the sovereign order in settler colonial contexts. Despite its cautious formulation, as it protects indigenous peoples’ rights above settler prerogatives, the Declaration constitutes a powerful anti-settler manifesto. Contra Merlan, I would conclude by noting that it wasn’t a bland statement, but the unresolved settler colonial character of the settler polities, and that it isn’t only a matter of liberal democratic political cultures and their constraints. It is settler colonialism.

Thus, reflection on the dynamics of settler colonialism can help understanding a multiplicity of situations: what in one of the founding texts of what should consolidate into “settler colonial studies” Alan Lawson defined the (settler) “Second” world (Lawson 1995), as well as what are generally referred to as “Third” and (indigenous) “Fourth” worlds. Settler colonialism ultimately contributes to South-South dialogue by proposing that settler and indigenous experiences should integrate traditional understandings of the binary relationship between North and South. I propose these three insights, and the suggestion that the distinction between colonialism and settler colonialism should be regarded analytically and not geographically (that is, that it is a distinction between separate forms and not between “colonies of exploitation” and “colonies of settlement”), as a preliminary framework for developing “settler colonial studies” as a genuinely global and transnational paradigm.

References


Duncan Bell, “John Stuart Mill on Colonies”, Political Theory, 38, 1, 2010, pp. 34-64.


