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What is the role of geography in sociopolitics?

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‘North’ and ‘South’ are simultaneously geographical and sociopolitical categories. Colonialism – a hierarchical relationship that is premised on the superordination of a metropole that is premised on the subordination of a periphery – is fundamentally involved in both dialectics: in the first case, because it is premised on a distinction that only geographical displacement makes possible; in the second case, because it is a relationship – it defines self and other as it embeds them in an inherently unequal relationship.

Settler colonialism – a particular form of colonialism where the colonisers “come to stay” and are founders of political orders that are endowed with a specific self-constituent sovereign capacity – is a manipulation of both these categories and their ordering; this is why it should feature in any South-South dialogue.

Geographically, settler colonialism is premised on a displacement that is ultimately a non-displacement. Settlers transform geography and a capacity to do so is a measure of their success. As well as founders of political orders, therefore, they are destroyers of ecological ones (and therefore builders of new landscapes). Indeed, it is exactly because they are able to destroy existing ecosystems that they are so effective at establishing durable political regimes. As they consume places at a fierce rate and routinely dissolve distance, they Europeanise space. No wonder that the old term for settler colonialism was ‘planting’; their countries look like the ones they have left behind.

Of course settlers need to manipulate the terms of geographical representation as well. Wakefield’s imaginary goodbye to his grandmother is a case in point. As she mentioned how far New Zealand was, he tore the map, connected the opposed margins, and turned it upside down to place the settler colony to be at the centre of his representational system. James Vetch’s 1838 Map of Australia, another geographically imaginative act of settler colonial evocation, showed Spain and Portugal tucked in at the bottom.

This notion, however, is much older and Jean-Pierre Purry, colonial adventurer and serial promoter of (failed) settlements, tried to establish colonies in Australia, South Africa and North America because he assumed in an act of geographical speculation (he was a compulsive speculator) that colonisation – the reproduction of a self-supporting and virtuous sociopolitical bodies – would only be successful at around 33 degrees latitude, the latitude of biblical Canaan. These are all examples of decentering acts of geographical manipulation that envisage a north in the south.

Sociopolitically, settler colonialism also turns the metropole-periphery opposition upside down. This is why we can talk about a settler “revolution”. Settler colonialism establishes immediately autonomous sociopolitical bodies that, in the future, will be entirely independent of the ties that bind it to an originating locale. Settler colonialism is thus colonialism without permanent external subordination (settler control of indigenous alterities is not exactly external – that is why the notion of internal colonialism emerges in settler colonial contexts.
and is eventually reimported to Europe). Settler colonialism produces islands of autonomously colonising ‘North’ in the global ‘South’.

**Question**

How do we narrate the lack of exact fit between geography and sociopolitics when we approach the North-South divide (beside settler colonialism, the topic of my intervention, isn’t there plenty of ‘North’ in the ‘South’ and even much more ‘South’ in the ‘North’)?

¿Cómo narrar la falta de ajuste exacto entre la geografía y sociopolítica cuando nos acercamos a la división Norte-Sur (al lado de colonialismo, el tema de mi intervención, ¿no hay un montón de “Norte” en el “Sur”, y más aún mucho ‘Sur’ en el ‘Norte’)?

A statement and question offered to participants of the symposium Diálogo Trans-Pacífico y Sur-Sur: Perspectivas Alternativas a la Cultura y Pensamiento Eurocéntrico y Noroccidental, University of Santiago, 8-9 January 2013