Aziz Rana’s *Two Faces of American Freedom* is an impressive piece of historical scholarship inspired by an important contemporary issue: the rise of the ‘imperial presidency’, a marked institutional and ideological shift in the United States toward administrative centralisation and aggressive foreign interventionism that has reached an apex (or nadir) with the now decade-long War on Terror. As the author noted in a recent book talk sponsored by the Yale Law School, ‘today the US enjoys tremendous global power, but this power is increasingly disconnected and unmoored from democratic commitments at home’. Despite politicians’ pious appeals to the necessity of protecting America’s uniquely free, self-governing society from those who would threaten its security, each successive expansion of the War on Terror’s battlefield is accompanied by contractions of Americans’ civil liberties and new assertions of unchecked executive authority in the realm of foreign affairs.

Rana turns to history in order to criticise this development. In *Two Faces*, he provides ‘an alternative image of the nation’s founding and experience’ which unearths ‘a robust account of human freedom embedded in our past’. He calls this lost vision ‘freedom as self-rule’, a ‘radicalized’ classical republican concept of liberty formulated by colonists in British North America, which ‘involved the elimination of all modes of arbitrary authority and required individuals to assert actual decision-making power over economic and political relations, through productive control and democratic participation’. Freedom as self-rule is, to be sure, a powerful
antidote to present-day quiescence in the face of the imperial presidency, but its appearance in colonial America was not unproblematic. As the book’s title suggests, the colonial notion of freedom as self-rule was ‘two-faced’: ‘colonists saw their own internal account of liberty as necessitating external modes of supervision and control’. While white, male, Protestant inhabitants of British America enjoyed individual freedoms and access to governing institutions unparalleled in the metropole, they imposed a distinctly different regime on non-whites, females, and non-Protestants. Nor was this a contingent hypocrisy; Rana insists that ‘[r]ather than separate currents flowing into the well of American values, the democratic ideals themselves gained strength and meaning through frameworks of exclusion’. The confiscation of indigenous territories, coercive practices of labor-organisation imposed upon African slaves and Chinese migrants, subordination of women, and exclusion of Catholics and other religious minorities provided indispensable material support for freedom as self-rule.

Of course, Rana is not the first historian to notice contradictions in American political thought and development. His work follows on earlier accounts, most prominently Edmund Morgan’s *American Slavery, American Freedom*, which famously asserted that ‘Americans bought their independence with slave labor.’ Nor is Rana the first political theorist to describe the undemocratic entanglements of democratic thought. His book pursues themes in American jurisprudence history previously highlighted by critical race theory, and joins a growing literature on the connections between liberalism and imperialism. However, Rana advances on these precedents in several ways. Too often scholars have confined their analyses of racial, gender, and religious exclusion or domination to a ‘distant period of conquest and subordination’ – colonial Virginia, for example, in Morgan’s seminal work. By describing the pairing of internal equality and external subordination as ‘the basic governing framework for American life for over three centuries’ and tracing its manifestations from the seventeenth century to the present, Rana forges a much broader account, which nonetheless remains compelling and well-supported. He provides insightful new interpretations of several critical points in the United States’ political development, which I describe in greater detail below. In the realm of political theory, Rana issues a challenge to
those critics who would use the United States’ disgraceful history of racial exclusivity and imperial expansion to dismiss American political thought as a possible source of emancipatory insight. By highlighting individuals who called for the extension of freedom as self-rule to all Americans and the dismantling of the U.S.’s projects of external expansion, Rana shows that ‘apparently marginal views of freedom and social membership are themselves foundational aspects of our identity’, ready to be reactivated in the present day. Because of these important innovations, Two Faces has attracted much, and much deserved, attention from historians, legal scholars, and political theorists, who have published useful reviews of the book’s contributions to political history and political theory.

Here, I review a third contribution of Rana’s work, which I expect will be primarily appreciated by comparative-historical sociologists, anthropologists, and students of comparative politics: Two Faces argues that ‘most of the American experience is best understood as a constitutional and political experiment in [...] settler empire’ and thereby provides a framework for a comparative approach to the United States. Rana’s claim that many of the treasured features of the American experience ‘are present to varying degrees in numerous settler societies, as diverse as the French in Algeria, the English in Northern Ireland, the European Jewish community in Israel/Palestine, and the Chinese in Taiwan’ may be the book’s most provocative intervention. This critique of the commitment to American ‘exceptionalism’ that structures so much of both scholarly and popular work on the United States is bound to ruffle many feathers. Below, I first describe Rana’s use of the concept of settler colonialism to frame his study of the United States, noting in particular how this approach lends itself to comparison; secondly, I raise some general questions about applying the concept, in future work on the United States.

THE UNITED STATES AS SETTLER EMPIRE

In Two Faces, Rana adopts a definition of ‘settler colonialism’ originally proposed by David Fieldhouse in 1965, which persists in the literature on the subject today: ‘settler societies are characterized by substantial and long-lasting imperial populations,
which seek to transplant home country ways to the new environment. The distinguishing feature of settler colonialism, for Rana as for his forbears, is the settlers’ relations with indigenous communities and other racial and ethnic groups. In settler colonies, as opposed to other kinds of colonies, ‘the primary approach to the local population’ was driven less by the desire ‘to govern indigenous peoples or to enlist them in their economic ventures than to seize their land and push them beyond an ever-expanding frontier of settlement’. Thus, as we saw above, Rana places the United States as occupying a category shared by other former British colonies in Southern Africa and the Antipodes, French colonies in North Africa, or Jewish settlements in Palestine, rather than one shared by the Spanish and Portuguese colonies of the Americas, where extensive use was made of both indigenous and imported African labor, resulting in societies that bore little resemblance to their respective metropoles. I make special note of this implication of the settler colonialism framework here, because it will figure importantly in my evaluation below.

Rana interprets several important qualities of the United States’ colonial pre-history through the lens of settler colonialism. Like other settler colonies, British America exhibited ‘greater equality within the settler colony than in the imperial metropole or home country; a cultural sense of being ‘chosen’ as an ethnic or religious community for a historical mission; a greater emphasis on militarism due to perceived threats from indigenous and foreign populations; and, finally, a wariness of metropolitan social and political customs, which are depicted at times as corrupt or decadent’. In the particular context of British North America, these elements combined to form a ‘unique settler ideology’ with four components: a radicalised republican concept of liberty, which viewed ‘economic independence as the ethical basis of free citizenship’; a defense of territorial conquest as ‘the basic engine of republican freedom’, the surest means of acquiring and diffusing the material requisites of economic independence and thus freedom; a presumption that ‘republican principles at root were not universally inclusive’, but rather exclusive to fellow-settlers; and an openness to European immigration as a means of increasing the population of settlers. Rana traces appearances of this ideology, which he calls ‘settlerism’,
through the first century of the United States’ independent existence, dividing his presentation into three chapters.

The first chapter takes us from the origins of British colonisation in North America to the American Revolution. Rana describes an early version of colonial administration, which ‘situated settlers on a continuum of feudal subjectship alongside native groups and even African slaves’, giving way to a new framework, ‘based on ethnicity and Protestant faith’, wherein ‘settlers saw themselves alone as free Englishmen’, entitled to a range of privileges denied other inhabitants of the colonies. This shift provided the necessary context for the emergence of settlerism:

Anglo colonists increasingly viewed their own expansive practice of freedom as the product of British ancestry [...] This combination of extensive autonomy and cultural pride in Anglo heritage made settlers particularly wary of threats to liberty. Surrounded by French imperialists, Catholic settlers, African slaves, and Indian tribes, it also bred a sense of continual crisis that sowed the seeds for revolt.

British success in the Seven Years’ War did the rest; Protestant colonists initially celebrated victory over France, thinking that British expansion would bring Catholic persecution and vast new lands in its trail. The metropole, however, had other ideas: a series of proclamations, court decisions, and Acts of Parliament limited settlers’ ability to acquire Indian lands, and extended significant protections to both non-European and non-Protestant inhabitants of the new territories. Rana achieves his impressive best in describing Anglo-Protestant colonists’ furious reactions to these developments. Because settlers thought of their own freedom as dependent upon the unfreedom of ethnic and religious others, the British Empire’s shift to ‘greater tolerance and ethnic inclusiveness meant depriving all British subjects – regardless of British ancestry or Protestant faith – of economic and political self rule’. Far from ‘universalizing freedom’, for these settlers, the Empire’s ‘new practices simply truncated the meaning of liberty and reduced Anglo colonists to the
level of their cultural inferiors’. The Revolution, then, emerges as an act of self-assertion by embattled colonists, an effort to preserve Anglo-Protestant supremacy in the New World by stifling a new experiment in more universal freedom and equality, a perfect mirror image of the standard account.

It would be difficult to overstate the originality and importance of Rana’s portrayal of the American Revolution as ‘settler revolt’. Though able historians have treated the connection between the reforms that followed the Seven Years’ War and the thirteen colonies’ drive to independence before, no previous work has placed the American Revolution within a framework that so clearly lends itself to comparative analysis. In Rana’s telling, British reforms were an attempt to solve a dilemma posed by their rather sudden acquisition of a ‘polyglot empire’ composed of peoples with very different racial and cultural attributes. The policies proposed for North America are precursors of the systems of ‘indirect rule’ which would later be imposed in Africa and South Asia. Rana’s colonists, on the other hand, stage the world’s ‘first [...] successful settler revolt against metropolitan rule’, setting an example that would be followed later in settler outposts throughout the world. By making imperialism and settlerism central concepts in his approach to the American Revolution, Rana deals a devastating blow to scholarship committed to American exceptionalism, which has sequestered the study of American history and politics for too long.

If this were Two Faces’ only contribution, it would be quite a worthy book, but in subsequent chapters, Rana extends his analysis through history, tracing the evolution of settlerism in the years between the ratification of the Constitution and the Civil War (Chapter Two), and between Reconstruction and the turn of the twentieth century (Chapter Three). In a sense, these two chapters tell similar stories, separated by half a century. In each, Rana documents the rise of a ‘populist’ alternative to settler exclusivity, which sought to expand the community of persons enjoying freedom as self-rule and de-couple internal equality from external domination. Thomas Paine and William Manning attacked growing inequality in the early republic, suggesting policies to broaden land ownership. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Landon Bylesby, Orestes Brownson, and Thomas Skidmore sought to use the powers of the federal
government to serve the interests of working people, arguing that the capacity of territorial expansion to provide an increasing population with the requisites of economic independence was necessarily limited. And, in the years following the Civil War, Terence Powderly, Tom Watson, and William Neville attempted to organise across racial divides, drawing connections between external assertions of power and the creation of hierarchical institutions for domestic rule. Each of these promising movements was met and overcome by the concerted efforts of mercantile or industrial capital and the federal government, with the result, each time, being a constriction of universalist, pro-statist, anti-imperial populism to xenophobic, anti-statist, aggressively-expansionist settlerism: ‘with a more robust vision of populism in retreat, white laborers struggled to preserve their economic and political freedom by consolidating the forms of discretionary power’ exerted over non-white laborers.

In this manner, Rana interprets both the Jacksonian era and the end of Reconstruction as further flowerings of the same settler ideology that underlay the Revolution. Along the way, he offers interesting re-readings of the legal framework of westward expansion, several Supreme Court cases – the analysis of Justice Taney’s infamous majority opinion in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* is particularly worthwhile – and the evolution of immigration policy. These constitute important contributions to American history, but unfortunately and perhaps inevitably, the comparative impulse that animates *Two Faces*’ early chapters seems to fall by the wayside as it marches steadily through the centuries. Rana provocatively notes the similarity between Kwame Nkrumah’s concept of ‘Neo-Colonialism’ and the fears of ‘settler elites’ in the newly independent United States, ‘the first significant postcolonial society’, but this is the last insight of its kind, and it is less well-developed than earlier comparisons. This is less a failure of the work than a missed opportunity; Rana’s adoption of the concept of settler colonialism might have permitted him to make significant advances on a number of questions central to American political development – the rise of the administrative state, the weakness of socialism, the changing nature of the presidency – which have been previously framed as comparative puzzles, but never effectively investigated in comparative perspective.
The absence of explicit comparisons in these chapters also diminishes the force of the normative argument Rana makes. It is hard, at times, to imagine how the story he tells could have been otherwise, how the populist alternatives that briefly appeared on the American scene could have been anything but fleeting, and thus how they could reemerge today as part of a revitalised commitment to freedom as self-rule. Perhaps Rana would reply that comparison cannot strengthen his case, since no other country has succeeded in offering a broader swath of its citizenry access to the requisites of economic and political independence than the United States, but if this is so, then we have stumbled, unwittingly, into yet another narrative of American exceptionalism, though one lacking the rose tint of its predecessors.

The book’s fourth chapter only intensifies the sense of despair. Here, Rana charts the demise of settlerism, a consequence of the closing of the frontier in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Again, Rana draws upon previous accounts that have treated the 1890s as a critical turning point, while advancing their claims by placing them in a broader framework. For Rana, the turn of the twentieth century ushers ‘a revised account of liberty’ into American political discourse, which replaced freedom as self-rule with ‘security from economic want’ conceived now not as a ‘precondition for achieving economic and political independence,’ but rather ‘an end in itself.’ Rana finds reflections of this paradigm shift in immigration policy – a system permitting relatively free entry and alien voting for European immigrants is replaced by quota restrictions and bureaucratised deportation procedures – and foreign affairs. For ‘early colonists, the primary motive driving empire had been new land for white settlement’, which led to a practice of incorporating new territories on the same terms as established states. But after the Spanish-American war, ‘the United States found itself with a variety of possessions none of which could be settled by white Americans, and whose local populations did not fit historic criteria for ethnic and cultural assimilation’. Thus, at the turn of the century, the Supreme Court broke with its precedents, developing a new legal framework in which territorial acquisitions – Puerto Rico being the preeminent example – could be preserved in a permanent limbo characterised by discretionary authority and offering no clear path to statehood.
Rana also describes the emergence of what he terms the ‘plebiscitary’ or ‘imperial’ presidency as an aspect of this shift away from settlerism. The Great Depression allowed Franklin Delano Roosevelt to achieve the sort of discretionary executive authority in domestic affairs his cousin Theodore had wielded externally. ‘Under the New Deal, the presidency became both the primary instrument for collective change and the single agent held responsible for government action’.36 The ideal of popular self-government was set aside to attend to the basic material needs generated by a rapidly-industrialising society. Rana allows that the New Deal was ‘experienced on the ground by many Americans as decisively improving their daily lives’ but insists that ‘as the economic crisis abated, the ultimate implications of the new order became more apparent’ with the creation of new, and newly pervasive bureaucratic organisations ‘further separating ordinary Americans from actual decision making’.37 The conclusion that America’s early attachment to republican freedom was overcome by the politics of necessity is surprising in a book that began by stating its disagreement with Hannah Arendt’s exceptionalist narrative of the American founding, but it is not an unconvincing genealogy of our current predicament.38

Rana’s depiction of the present conjuncture is, then, rather bleak. The Civil Rights Movement’s leading lights – W. E. B. DuBois and Martin Luther King – outlined a new vision of universal and non-imperial republican liberty.39 But ultimately, this alternative populism also succumbed, with supporters of racial equality coming to focus ‘on distributing more meritocratically the country’s few positions of corporate and governmental power [...] rather than democratizing all of collective life’.40 As a result, we inhabit a world dominated by an imperial power expanding its influence over an ever-greater portion of the globe’s surface, which allows even its own citizens a marginal and diminishing share of authority. The United States’ experiment with settler empire has been replaced by an ‘orientation to the world [that] combines some of the most problematic features of the settler past without its emancipatory aspirations’. We are encouraged to ‘invert such developments, to revive accounts of self-rule, and to dissolve their connections to external subordination at home and abroad—to make freedom truly universal’ but, again, the absence of a comparative perspective leaves us with little reason to think things could be otherwise than
Simon, ‘The United States as Settler Empire’

they are. Here it would have been helpful to know whether, in Rana’s estimation, another country offers us an example of a better-managed transition to post-colonialism. On the other hand, the fact that Two Faces encourages us to ask that question, one that has rarely been posed regarding the United States, is an extraordinary accomplishment in its own right.

SETTLERISM AND COLONIALISM

In closing, I would like to briefly step back from the specific work under review in order to consider the concept of settler colonialism and its applicability to the United States more broadly. My return to first principles should not be taken to undermine, even slightly, the compliments I’ve paid Rana’s work above; in Two Faces, Rana uses the concept of settler colonialism to illuminate the American experience in an unassailably effective and innovative manner. Nonetheless, we may still wonder whether a different concept would be preferable for future work in this vein.

As I noted above, in treating the political history of the United States as an ongoing experiment in ‘settler empire’, Rana adopts a well-established analytical framework. The basic intuition receives an admirably succinct formulation in Lorenzo Veracini’s essay introducing this journal: ‘colonialism is not settler colonialism.’ The two are ‘not merely different’, but actually ‘antithetical formations’, distinguished by the fact that ‘colonisers and settler colonisers want essentially different things’. While colonisers arrive in a new territory and seek to exploit the pre-existing population as cheap or compliant labor, settler colonisers seek to displace or eliminate pre-existing populations, desiring only the territory they formerly occupied. The different motivations behind colonialism and settler colonialism produce further divergences, particularly in the ideological strategies used to justify exploitation or displacement: whereas colonisers claim that their racial or civilisational superiority entitles them to extract labor, settler colonisers premise their territorial claims on the absence of a pre-existing claimant or on the incapacity of pre-existing claimants to make legitimate claims on territory. The two structures are also associated with different forms of resistance by the colonised, and different forms of post-colonial society.
Settler colonialism is, then, an eminently plausible analytical category; it relies on an immediately intuitive distinction and responds to an apparent confusion in existing literatures on colonialism, imperialism, and post-colonialism. In practice, however, the concept of settler colonialism is exceedingly difficult to apply. As even Veracini concedes, colonial and settler colonial 'stances are often intimately intertwined and there are elements of both demands in most statements uttered by both colonisers and settler colonisers'.

If it is hard to disentangle individual attitudes, it is even harder to categorise entire societies according to the distinctions drawn above. There may never have been a 'settler colony' that was not, at the same time, also a 'colony'; certainly this is the conclusion frequently drawn in individual case studies. Thus, attempts to classify a given society as either 'colony' or 'settler colony' often rest on superficial, stereotypical, or teleological assumptions.

The United States and Latin America provide a useful illustration. The pair seems, at first blush, to exemplify the difference between colonialism and settler colonialism. In David Fieldhouse's early and influential work, it did just that: Fieldhouse argues that in the Americas, Spaniards and Portuguese 'worked out four of the five models for effective colonization which were typical of the first colonial empires' omitting only 'the “pure” settlement colony of British and French North America, where, because Amerindians would not work for Europeans and conditions were unsuited to plantation production, emigrants created a still closer facsimile of European society than the Spanish “mixed” colonies'. One can find similar distinctions drawn in other works, but as the historian John Elliott has argued, these binaries 'while ingenious, [are] not [...] persuasive'. Both the British and Spanish Americas were exceedingly diverse entities. Though parts of British North America could perhaps be called 'pure' settlement colonies, others bore more resemblance to the ‘plantation’ colonies of Portuguese Brazil, or the ‘occupation’ colonies of Spanish Chile. Conversely, parts of Spanish America were relatively 'pure', that is to say, Spanish colonists also adopted policies of indigenous displacement and extermination rather than exploitation.

These points might seem relatively obvious, but overly-simple characterisations of the Americas' major colonial systems creep into
scholarly work with striking frequency, and the settler colony/colony schema could easily contribute to this problematic tendency. In Two Faces, for example, Rana writes that ‘In many ways, the legal and political structures imposed by colonial administrators in the earliest decades of English expansion in North America best approximated those taking root in the Spanish colonies.’ However, ‘just 100 years later, the North American colonies diverged dramatically from their Spanish counterparts, emphasizing settler social supremacy as well as internal self-government and decentralized administrative control’. Any scholar of Spanish American history (unfortunately Rana does not cite one) would be surprised to learn, by implication, that Spanish American colonialism did not ‘emphasize settler social supremacy’ or display ‘internal self-government and decentralized administrative control’. In fact the descendents of Spanish settlers in the Americas – known as criollos – did participate in many local and regional political and administrative institutions, though as in British North America the degree of participation varied across both time and space. Their fellow Americans of indigenous, African, or mixed descent were, as in British North America, largely excluded. This is not to say that there were no differences between British and Spanish America – there were, and they were multiple and profound. But they cannot be captured by the analytical categories of ‘settler colonialism’ and ‘colonialism’ because neither British nor Spanish America was ever unambiguously one or the other kind of society.

Where, then, does this leave attempts, like Rana’s, to use the concept of settler colonialism to frame studies of the United States? As I noted above, Two Faces is a compelling work because it expands the compass of inquiry, opening the way to comparative approaches that were previously closed off by scholarly commitments to American exceptionalism. Insofar as future works follow in this form, they too will make important contributions to American political and intellectual history. However, as I’ve argued, the concept of settler colonialism also carries the potential to constrict comparative approaches, as when it is used to draw an excessively sharp distinction between the forms of colonialism practiced in what are today the United States and Latin America. In this way, use of the concept could lead to reformulated exceptionalist narratives no less problematic than their forbears. By all appearances, this possibility
remains remote, but it will be worth considering as future work emerges on settler colonialism in the Americas.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**


**NOTES**

4. Rana, *Two Faces*, p. 3.
12. Rana, *Two Faces*, p. 3 (Italics in original).
15. Rana, *Two Faces*, pp. 8-9 (internal citations removed).
Simon, ‘The United States as Settler Empire’

19 Rana, Two Faces, p. 58.
20 Rana, Two Faces, p. 24.
22 Rana, Two Faces, p. 27.
23 Rana, Two Faces, p. 72.
24 Rana, Two Faces, p. 11.
25 Rana, Two Faces, pp. 120-31.
26 Rana, Two Faces, pp. 153-62.
28 Rana, Two Faces, p. 165.
29 Rana, Two Faces, pp. 168-72.
30 Rana, Two Faces, pp. 131-2.
33 Rana, Two Faces, p. 262.
34 Rana, Two Faces, p. 272.
35 Rana, Two Faces, pp. 275-81.
36 Rana, Two Faces, p. 301.
37 Rana, Two Faces, p. 313.
38 Rana, Two Faces, pp. 20-2.
39 Rana, Two Faces, pp. 329-36.
40 Rana, Two Faces, p. 328.
41 Rana, Two Faces, p. 329.
42 See cites above, note 6.
45 See, for example, the ones assembled in Elkins and Pedersen, Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century.
Simon, ‘The United States as Settler Empire’

50 Rana, Two Faces, p. 50.