Introduction

What is Settler Colonialism and What It Has to Do with the American West?

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Coming to grips with settler colonialism can be confusing and frustrating. Many Western historians hear their colleagues refer to it, see conference programs struck with it, and read an increasing number of publications using the term. But when asked what settler colonialism actually stands for and why historians should bother with it, the answers easily become muddied. Some probably see it as the latest craze in academia, a catchphrase for supposedly trendy research that pops up here and there, and pretty much everywhere, but ultimately proves shallow and as a trend short-lived. Some might reason that settler colonialism is used so freely by scholars that it risks becoming a generic concept that flattens out complex historical processes, demonizes white settlers, and erases Native agency. Before writing settler colonialism off, however, we might try to understand what it stands for and what opportunities it offers Western historians.

Settler Colonial Basics

Settler colonialism is both an object of study and a particular way of looking at history. It stands for subject matter, a historical process, but it also constitutes a research concept: a perspective and a field of enquiry. It refers to a distinctive form of colonialism where the settlers aim to replace the Natives/previous residents and capture terrestrial and maritime spaces with the intention of making them their own. Settler colonialism thus involves conquest, long-range migration, permanent settlement (or at least intent of such), elimination of Natives, and the reproduction of one’s own society on what used to be other people’s lands. Arguably settler colonialism shares ground with other forms of colonialism, such as extractive and garrison colonialism. But it goes beyond the rule of difference, appropriation of material resources, exploitation of labor, and the coercive interference with local political and cultural structures that frequently characterize colonial situations.

As a research concept settler colonialism has roots in Australia and Canada that came up with the term to describe historical and contemporary Indigenous-settler meetings in their own societies. Coming to its own in the 1990s and early 2000s as part of the rising critique of global inequalities and the drive for Indigenous rights, the nascent theorization of settler colonialism owes a great deal to anthropologist Patrick Wolfe. It was Wolfe who suggested that unlike other forms of colonialism, settler colonialism is not primarily an effort to build a master-servant relationship interested in exploitation of Native labor in the extraction of natural resources, but instead is more concerned about replacement and access to territory, the land itself. Wolfe underlined that settler colonialism “destroys to replace,” introduces “a zero-sum contest over land,” and is characterized by “logic of elimination,” a sustained institutional tendency to eliminate the Natives who stand in the way of settlers’ ambitions and futures. As “settlers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event” or a series of isolated events, Wolfe demonstrates.¹

If Wolfe set the tenor of the field, other scholars have added layers to it with differing emphasis. For example, historian Lorenzo Veracini stresses the conceptual difference between colonialism and settler colonialism. He draws attention to settler sovereignty and to settler colonial social formations involving the metropole, the settlers, and the Natives, as well as exogenous others, probationary settlers representing, for example, different ethnic groups. Historians Caroline Elkins and
Susan Pedersen argue that settlers sought to rid themselves of metropolitan control and Indigenous populations as quickly as possible and to form communities bound by ethnicity and faith in “virgin lands.” In their effort to avoid relations of domination—which forms the basic tenant of “regular” colonialism—settler colonies developed as plantation economies with imported, servile labor or as “pure” settler colonies with prospering immigrant population, integration to world markets, and considerable political autonomy.

While case studies regularly focus on individual colonies and/or empires, there exists a tendency to emphasize settler colonialism’s transnational character. The concept enables identifying and interrogating parallels, connections, and networks between and within empires and incorporating different scales of historical analysis from the local to the global.

It is James Belich’s reading of “settler revolutions” and “the rise of the Anglo-World” in the nineteenth century that captures the popular understanding of what settler colonialism stands for as a historical process. In the United States and British Wests (foremost Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa) settler revolutions involved and coincided with the industrial and transportation revolutions and nationalism and nationalization. Is settler colonialism then somehow restricted to Anglos? Absolutely not. Recent literature identifies settler colonialism in French Algeria, many Latin American countries, Portuguese Mozambique, Russian Caucasus and Siberia, German Southwest Africa, and the German East (German-Polish borderlands). Furthermore, nonwhites can, of course, also institute settler colonial projects. Well-known examples include Chinese settlement projects in Manchuria from the late 1800s onward as well as Japan’s conquest of Hokkaido and its activities in Korea and Manchuria.

Basically settler colonialism can take place at any historical period and geographic location and it can involve any race or ethnic group. What is needed is conquest, elimination of Natives, replacement, and far-settlement. Therefore, for instance, areas like today’s Russian Karelia and what used to be Finnish Karelia until 1944, or urban spaces such as Russian Kaliningrad, what in turn previously was the German Königsberg, might fall under the rubric of settler colonialism. So might Lapland and the Sami peoples, subject to Russian, Finnish, Swedish, and Norwegian variations of settler colonialism. Israeli actions in Palestine offer an example of recent settler colonialism that has drawn ample scholarly attention. British North America in turn stretches the chronological confines of settler colonialism to the late 1500s, while one recent study by Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini discusses settler colonialism in ancient Rome, Ireland (British conquest), and Liberia, among other places.

Like colonialism, settler colonialism can also be deconstructed and overturned. Some settler projects have proven more permanent than others. Today, as Mahmood Mamdani explains, European settler colonialism has been widely defeated in Africa, although its legacies and other forms of neocolonialism are still relevant. In nineteenth-century South Africa and Algeria sizable numbers of European settlers employed harsh measures targeting the elimination of the Natives, but in both places settlers remained a minority and their power was eventually reversed following bloody and bitter struggles. Other projects ended more abruptly. Following the genocidal wars against the indigenous Hereros and Namas by the German government, German Southwest Africa, the only German overseas settler colony, still had less than 20,000 white settlers by World War I (compared to the 500,000 European settlers in Algeria) when Germany lost its formal colonies. German drive to the East climaxed with the Nazi’s highly ambitious and equally destructive plans of acquiring massive settler living space inside Europe. This project crumbled with Germany’s defeat in World War II, although not before resulting in the annihilation of millions of “Natives,” in this case Slavs and Jews.

**Settler Colonial West**

Settler colonialism comes with the potential to energize, shape, and shake up Western history in a variety of ways. First, settler colonialism inserts the American West to the broader horizons of North American, Atlantic, Pacific, and global history. It helps historians avoid a tunnel vision and a sharp division between external and internal; to look beyond regional and national boundaries and escape the confines of the national-history paradigm when reaching toward more open-ended horizons of global integration. Settler colonialism makes the American West part of the flows and webs within and between empires and effectively associates it with the world of empires. More...
specifically it sets the West alongside other modern settler colonies on a global scale, spaces where similar historical processes coincided and entangled with the West. In doing so settler colonialism offers a frame of reference, a context for understanding that histories of peoples, regions, nations, and empires are inextricably linked rather than independent of each other.

Second, as a research concept settler colonialism is extremely flexible in a sense that it embraces different modes of analysis—spatial, social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental—and covers a broad range of intersecting subject matters and themes. Settler colonialism can be used to investigate memory, cultural representations, and performances—for instance, in historical monuments, human exhibitions, art, literature, and movies. Settler colonial analysis also deals with questions pertaining to race and space: the creation of living space, land acquisition practices, property rights, extractive industries, and ecological transfers. Rather than homogenizing or demonizing all settlers, settler colonialism interrogates settler identities and communities, overland and overseas mobilities, kinship, friendship, and other microsocial networks, information flows, portability of cultural practices, and notions of settler femininities and masculinities. Moreover, the literature abounds with explanations stressing settler sovereignty and the accompanying tensions between the metropole and the settlers in the nationalization of imperial and borderlands spaces.

Recurrently criticized for undermining Native agency and power, much of settler colonial literature actually investigates settler–Indigenous exchanges and displays a steadfast effort for inclusivity and sensitivity to Indigenous viewpoints. The bulk of this scholarship deals with the panoply of forms comprising the settlers’ elimination of Natives: from outright collective violence—including genocide, ethnic cleansing massacre, and war—to more subtle ways of cultural eradication and coercive power—legal status, religious conversion, labor, education, child removal, and female reproduction. And settler colonialism certainly recognizes the multiple ways the Natives have fought back to stem, resist, and reverse settler colonial policies. In conjunction, settler colonialism helps explain the racialization of immigrant groups. The West and other settler spaces around the world comprised of a broad mixture of people representing different ethnicities, races, and social classes. Veracini applies the term “exogenous others” to identify certain groups of probationary settlers, whose access is pending, restricted, or possibly denied. One such group of exogenous others were the Chinese, whose global migrations linked the West with Australia, South Africa, and Canada. In the late 1800s all these settler nations developed new methods of border enforcement, immigration policies, and racial privilege in an effort to make their settler spaces into what Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds identify as “white men’s countries.”

Third, settler colonialism makes possible a fresh periodization of the history of trans-Mississippi West to the settler colonial period and the Native ground/middle ground West that preceded it. The West started to become settler colonial sometime in the 1800s after the Louisiana Purchase and at the time of the Oregon Compromise, the U.S.-Mexican War, and the American Civil War. Taking different trajectories and happening unevenly in various parts of the West, the rise of settler colonialism signaled a shift from trade-centered to land-centered colonialism (from sharing to excluding). It saw the West transformed from a syncretic yet highly competitive world of Indigenous power, plural sovereignty, and cross-cultural alliances and mixing into a realm where masses of white settlers sought exclusive rights to the land, the U.S. government nationalized space and seized the monopoly of violence, market capitalism and extraction of natural resources fueled by outside funding reached industrial scales, independent Indians lost their autonomy, and society was organized around racialization of groups. The scale, speed, and ruthlessness of American Western conquest inspired other settler colonial projects in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For Germany, South Africa, and French Algeria, among others, the West offered a precedent, a model to emulate, but also a rival to outdo.

The above explanation not only indicates that the West remains settler colonial today but foregrounds white Anglo expansion as the principal motor of settler colonialism. Undoubtedly, this represents the standard interpretation of settler colonialism and the American West. However, it is possible to think of alternate readings that can make locating the temporal and racial moorings of settler colonialism in the West far from clear cut. Most significantly, did something we could
call Indigenous settler colonialism exist in the West? Perhaps settler colonialism reached the Plains with the removed Eastern Indians like the Cherokees? Or how about the powerful expansions of the Lakotas and the Comanches? Both cases involved conquest and long-range migration. Both groups made the land their own, came to stay, and replaced (or tried to) Native groups such as the Pawnees, the Crows, and the Apaches (on the Southern Plains). Or how about the Spanish? While it is easy to claim that they were mainly concerned with extracting natural bounty and converting souls to Catholicism, did Spain also try to create a settler society in sections of New Mexico, Texas, and California? Do Spanish failures to lure large numbers of Iberian and other European colonists, to eliminate the Pueblos, to promulgate a large settler population through missionary conversion and metissage, and to control the Apaches and Comanches make their efforts any less settler colonial at heart? How about the fur trade? It certainly was not “settler colonial,” right? The British, Russian, and French trade-centered colonialism in the West neither showed the capacity nor the inclination to eliminate the Natives but rather viewed them as valuable allies and as a useful labor force. Then again, for example Fort Ross, a trading base on the California coast, was among other things also an attempt to establish a beachhead for permanent Russian settlement, agriculture, and livestock industries.

Does settler colonialism simply muddy the waters or does it carry the potential to revolutionize the way we think about the West and its history? Conquest, taking land and maritime spaces and making them one’s own, and the elimination of Natives and their replacement certainly would seem to offer the tools around which to build a nuanced and increasingly international/transnational reading of Western history. The standard version of settler colonialism that centers Anglo expansion in the 1800s and links it to similar processes around the globe may provide the West an overarching historical narrative that crystallizes its identity without succumbing to fallacies of national exceptionalism. But settler colonialism can also sustain alternate interpretations of the past if we were to suggest, for instance, that some Indigenous expansions in the West might have been settler colonial. Perhaps in all its potential complexity settler colonialism represents at the very least a move toward more multivocal understandings of past and present that knit together various historical scales. Settler colonialism is critical of global inequalities and Indigenous exploitation, and thus interrogates settler expansions as exchanges grounded on violence, dispossession, differentiation, and resistance. Settler colonialism encourages, in fact demands, intricate readings of settler cultures and Indigenous power, seeing history as consisting of diffused, contested, and fragile exchanges. Settler colonialism is something that stems from our current needs to better understand our global present, to take seriously the histories of Indigenous peoples, and to expand and deepen our horizons of transnational patterns, networks, and flows, our shared histories and divergent trajectories.

NOTES


2. On Israeli settler colonialism, see the special issue of Settler Colonial Studies 5, 3 (2015).


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