

# GLOBAL SOCIAL THEORY

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## Settler Colonialism

Settler colonialism is a distinct type of colonialism that functions through the replacement of indigenous populations with an invasive settler society that, over time, develops a distinctive identity and sovereignty. Settler colonial states include Canada, the United States, Australia, and South Africa, and settler colonial theory has been important to understanding conflicts in places like Israel, Kenya, and Argentina, and in tracing the colonial legacies of empires that engaged in the widespread foundation of settlement colonies. More recently, settler colonial analyses have been extended to the use of settler colonisation in larger imperial projects, and the impacts of settler colonial state power on global politics. As

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Lorenzo Veracini, a key scholar in settler colonial studies, argues “settler colonialism makes sense especially if it is understood globally, and that we live in a settler colonial global present” (*The Settler Colonial Present*, 2015).

Settler



colonialism can be distinguished from other forms of colonialism – including classical or metropole colonialism, and neo-colonialism – by a number of key features. First, settler colonisers “come to stay”: unlike colonial agents such as traders, soldiers, or governors, settler collectives intend to permanently occupy and assert sovereignty over indigenous lands. Second, settler colonial invasion is a structure, not an event: settler colonialism persists in the ongoing elimination of indigenous populations, and the assertion of state sovereignty and juridical control over their lands. Despite notions of post-coloniality, settler colonial societies do not stop being colonial when political allegiance to the founding metropole is severed. Third, settler colonialism seeks its own end: unlike other types of colonialism in which the goal is to maintain colonial structures and imbalances in power between coloniser and colonised, settler

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colonisation trends towards the ending of colonial difference in the form of a supreme and unchallenged settler state and people. However, this is not a drive to decolonise, but rather an attempt to eliminate the challenges posed to settler sovereignty by indigenous peoples' claims to land by eliminating indigenous peoples themselves and asserting false narratives and structures of settler belonging.

Settler colonial societies around the globe tend to rely on remarkably similar spatial constructs, power structures, and social narratives. Beginning with *terra nullius* – the perception that lands in long-term use by indigenous peoples are empty or unused – settler colonisation proceeds to carve up indigenous-held lands into discrete packets of private property. As settler collectives invest their identity and material belonging in these properties, they simultaneously create or empower a state to 'defend' these properties from indigenous peoples and nations who are seen as inherently threatening. The power of settler state structures is often embodied in the form of frontier police forces, like the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, various Australian mounted police forces, and the ubiquitous American cavalry of the 'Wild West', as well as bureaucratic agencies. These government officials have gone under many names, but in North America are commonly called 'Indian Agents', and they often wielded (and in some cases, continue to hold)

extraordinary power over indigenous peoples, including the ability to apprehend children, to prevent people from leaving official 'reserve' lands (or conversely, to expel individuals or families from reserved territories), to control employment, and even to summarily direct police or military forces against indigenous people. These extreme powers are exercised based on carefully constructed racist narratives. Consider the way indigenous people have (and are) considered to be 'savage – – men often portrayed as violent, women as hyper-sexualized, and both in need of care from the 'civilised' settler state. The narrative dehumanization of indigenous peoples supports parallel narratives of peaceful, adventurous and virtuous settlement and expansion, as 'brave pioneers' are held up as paragons of new settler nations carved out of frontier spaces.



As a

concept, settler colonialism has been in circulation for decades, but has achieved new relevance since the publication of a number of works in the later 1990s and early 2000s introduced settler colonial theory to disciplines such as anthropology,

sociology, and political theory. Debates around settler colonial studies have been contentious, especially around intersections between settler colonial racism and identity politics. Numerous works have explored the ways that oppressed or marginalized communities may be complicit in settler colonialism, often generating heated debates around who is or should be considered a 'settler'. Other critiques have pointed to the tendency among some scholars of settler colonialism to treat settlement as inevitable, simultaneously relieving settler societies and states of the burden of reconciling with indigenous peoples, and placing the burden of accommodating settler sovereignty onto those same indigenous peoples. More recently, settler colonial scholars have taken up the challenge of considering what decolonisation means for settler societies, drawing settler colonial theory into open-ended and forward-looking discussions on indigenisation, autonomy, and anti-state and anti-capitalist politics.

### **Essential Readings**

Veracini, L. (2015). *The Settler Colonial Present*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Veracini, L. (2010). *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Banivanua Mar, T. and Edmonds, P., eds.

(2010). *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan

### Further Readings

Barker, A.J. (2012). **Locating Settler Colonialism**. *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*

Barker, A.J. and Battell Lowman, E. (2015). *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

Tuck, E. and Yang, K.W. (2012). **Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor**. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, 1.

Wolfe, P. (1999). **Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event**. London: Cassell.

### Questions

What is the significance of settlement as a process? Why is it important to think of (classical) colonisation and settler colonisation as two distinct processes?

How does settler colonialism impact on 'exogenous Others' – groups of people who are neither indigenous to the territories claimed by the settler colony,

nor seen as part of the settler society by the majority of settler colonisers?

How is settler colonialism entangled with processes of racialization and capitalist accumulation? How do these processes differ or conflict?

How does settler colonialism turn 'land' into 'property'? How does this process relate to concepts such as 'enclosure', 'territorialization', and 'primitive accumulation'?

What would decolonization entail in a settler colonial context? Is decolonization possible?

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