

Settler Colonialism under a Shroud of Victimhood*

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The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had witnessed the emergence of two different paradigms of colonialism: the first, of which India was the classic example, involved the conquest of countries which had had a history of established central administrations that were sustained by established systems of surplus extraction, and the replacement of those old administrations by colonial regimes. The essence of this colonialism was, apart from finding a market for European goods at the expense of local craftsmen, the expropriation of this surplus and its shipment back to the metropolis in the form of commodities that the metropolis needed. There was very little migration of European population to these countries which were already well-populated and whose location in the tropics discouraged such migration from the temperate location of the metropolis.

The other paradigm, of which the US was the classic example, involved the conquest of territories where the local population was driven out from their land and it was occupied by settlers from the metropolis; the essence here was migration from the metropolis and the taking over of the land (and other assets) from the local inhabitants, who were either decimated or herded into “reservations”. I shall call these two paradigms “expropriative colonialism” and “settler colonialism” respectively.

The difference between the two consisted in the fact that in one case colonialism took away the products of the land; in the other case it took away the land itself. This however had an important implication: in the first case, it needed the local population to work on the land; if it expropriated too large a portion of the products of the land then the local population got starved, as occurred in British India in the form of the recurring famines. But then it also had to take some ameliorative measures so that enough people survived to produce the surplus that it needed to expropriate. In the case of settler colonies however there was no such compelling need to preserve a local population, especially if the scale of immigration from the metropolis was large enough, or if workers could be easily obtained from elsewhere in the event of the local population being decimated. Settler colonialism therefore was typically associated with ethnic cleansing, and often with genocidal ethnic cleansing.

There was another important feature of settler colonialism. It tended to be expansionary, in the sense that the land occupied by the settlers kept expanding. This happened when there was continuing immigration into the region; but it happened even otherwise, until either a natural limit was reached to the land that could be occupied, or the boundaries of a strong adjacent state presented an obstacle to any further occupation.

All this, one would have normally thought, belonged to the past: while imperialism remains a reality under capitalism, colonialism is no longer a matter of much relevance at present. This however is wrong. Israel has become a classic example of settler colonialism in contemporary times. The Jews, a persecuted minority for centuries, whose persecution reached its horrendous climax in the Holocaust, originally came to Palestine, encouraged by British colonialism, as refugees from a hostile world, and set up the Zionist state of Israel in 1948. But with the connivance

and active intervention of US imperialism, and with a succession of right-wing governments in power in that country, what had begun as a haven for persecuted refugees became an example of modern settler colonialism. It started to display all the features of settler colonialism, from its intrinsic expansionary tendency, with armed settlers from the country being encouraged to move to newer areas like the West bank and the Gaza strip, to its propensity for ethnic cleansing, and now even the resort to genocide.

All settler colonialisms are characterised by a regime of apartheid. This in a way is true of all colonialisms, where there is a strict division within each colonial city between the area where the colonial masters live and work, and the area where the ordinary people live; but under settler colonialism, the “white” areas do not merely accommodate a small number of colonial officials but a large immigrant population, making it resemble an apartheid situation much more closely. Not surprisingly, the contemporary example of settler colonialism, Israel, also presents a classic picture of apartheid.

Israeli settler colonialism would not have taken off without the solid backing of western imperialism. For imperialists it is first of all a way of overcoming all sense of guilt over centuries of persecution of Jews. Imperialist countries are absolving themselves of guilt at the expense of the Palestinian population. And for the Israeli right, the centuries of persecution, and above all the Holocaust, provides a kind of cover for settler colonialism; any criticism of this colonialism and its associated phenomena like apartheid, expansionism, ethnic cleansing, and even genocide, is immediately branded as “anti-semitism”, which makes it obviously abominable because of its association with the history of pogroms, and more recently with Nazism.

This is most convenient for imperialism and the right everywhere, as is evident from the fact that even in the midst of the current horrors being visited upon the population of Gaza by the Israeli government, pro-Palestinian demonstrations are proscribed in most metropolitan centres. They are of course occurring nonetheless, but their occurrence is despite government disapproval. In fact, such demonstrations in London have prompted the British home secretary, Suella Braverman, to accuse the London police of a pro-Palestinian bias!

A second reason for imperialist support for Israeli settler colonialism is that these countries themselves either came into being through, or benefitted from, settler colonialism in the past. Countries like the US, Canada and Australia were products of settler colonialism; having practised ethnic cleansing as the means of their own emergence, they can scarcely frown upon the practice now, especially when a favoured country like Israel practises it.

The most potent reason for their support however lies in the fact that Israel has emerged as a strong ally of imperialism, as its local satrap in west Asia. Imperialism has used several instruments for maintaining its hegemony in the region, from supporting Islamic fundamentalist groups (including Hamas itself) to weaken progressive-secular, Left and Communist movements in the region (Communism had a very strong base in the Arab world), to even armed intervention; and providing support and arms for Israeli settler colonialism, is an extremely powerful instrument in its armoury. It is not surprising that even in the midst of the genocide in Gaza, the

US voted against a UN General Assembly resolution asking for an immediate cease-fire. Ironically, it asks for an occasional “pause” in Israeli assault on “humanitarian” grounds. Its humanitarianism thus amounts to saying: let Israel kill and wound as many people as it likes, but humanitarianism demands that the dead and wounded should be periodically removed!

The inevitable logical denouement of Israeli settler colonialism, if it is allowed to continue, is the genocidal ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population; for, the corralling of the population into “open air prisons” like Gaza, reminiscent of the reservations into which the Amerindians were confined by immigrants from Europe, will not be considered sufficient for ensuring Israeli “security”. It is instructive in this context that Israeli construction firms want Indian workers to replace Palestinians, which only underscores the fact that the existence of the vast third world labour reserves makes any particular group of people, like the Palestinians, quite dispensable for Israeli settler colonialism.

This settler colonialism must be stopped, in the interests not just of the Palestinian people, but of the people of the entire world, for it represents the most aggressive and ruthless detachment of contemporary imperialism, that shrouds itself in self-righteousness because of the centuries of suffering of the Jewish people. This can be done only with the pressure of world public opinion. Many countries like Colombia, Bolivia and South Africa have snapped diplomatic relations with Israel; immense support for the Palestinian people is being expressed all over the world, with public demonstrations being held in several metropolitan countries, where the numbers participating have been unprecedented in recent years. Many of these demonstrations have been supported or organised by the local Jewish people who have expressed their opposition both to the genocide being carried out in Gaza and to the branding of any opposition to it as anti-semitism. The future not just of the Palestinian people, but of the people of the world, depends crucially on the success of this world-wide resistance that is breaking out.

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