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Settler Colonialism as a Category of Analysis: Citizenship and Material Dispossession in Palestine/Israel

While settler colonialism has long been a framework for analyzing the case of Palestine/Israel[1], its application in Palestine and Israel studies surged following the consolidation of settler colonial studies as a scholarly field. Recently, however, it came under scrutiny on both political and scholarly grounds. We do not give credence to the blanket rejection of the categories of colonialism or settler colonialism[2], as serious scholarly work over the last fifteen years has demonstrated their empirical and comparative validity[3], particularly in challenging the exceptionalism that dominated the study of Palestine/Israel[4]. Analytically, however, this category has been criticized for its usage as an empty slogan or an overgeneralized theoretical model[5]. We tend to agree with this critique and contend that settler colonialism is too often employed simplistically to substitute engagement with empirical evidence. We follow Frederick Cooper's observation that discussions of concepts and terminology «have moved away from the lived experiences the concept was supposed to elucidate»[6]. As social historians of Palestine/Israel, whose work is primarily archive-based, we take the example of citizenship and material dispossession in settler colonial context to demonstrate how evidence-based social history can promote our understanding of both theoretical concepts and lived realities.

Following Cooper[7], our interest is less in the theoretical logic of the settler colonial state and its theoretical or abstract implica-

[1] See, for example, F. Sayegh, *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine (1965)*, «Settler Colonial Studies», 2012, 1.

[2] See, for example, Donna Robinson Divine, *Word Crimes: Reclaiming the Language of The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, «Israel Studies», 2019, 2.

[3] See, for example J. Collins, *Global Palestine*, London, Hurst and Company, 2011; S.N. Robinson, *Citizen Strangers: Palestinians and the Birth of Israel's Liberal Settler State*, Redwood City, Stanford University Press, 2013; G. Algazi, *Nomadizing the Bedouins: Displacement, Resistance, and Patronage in the Northern Naqab, 1951-52*, «Journal of Palestine Studies», 2024, 1.

[4] O.J. Salamanca, M. Qato, K. Rabie, S. Samour, *Past Is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine*, «Settler Colonial Studies», 2012, 1.

[5] R. Greenstein, *Anti-Colonial Resistance in South Africa and Israel/Palestine: Identity, Nationalism, and Race*, Oxford, Routledge, 2023, pp. 231-232; R. Busbridge, *Israel-Palestine and the Settler Colonial «Turn»: From Interpretation to Decolonization*, «Theory, Culture & Society», 2018, 1. Busbridge particularly highlights «the dominance of Patrick Wolfe's "structural account of settler colonialism"» (p. 3). See P. Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native*, «Journal of genocide research», 2006, 4.

[6] F. Cooper, *Citizenship Between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960.* Princeton, NJ and London, Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 3; F. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2005, p. 177.

[7] F. Cooper, *Questioning Colonialism, 2005-2023*, «Ler História», 82, 2023.

tions on Palestinian lives, and more in how concrete historical actors acted and reacted within the constraints of the structure and processes of the settler colonial state. We view settler colonialism not as a timeless and unchanging model, but as a process and as a set of historical contingencies. This analytical approach is particularly useful in analyzing struggles over control of material resources. For instance, we use the example of material dispossession and demonstrate how the prism of settler colonialism is most useful for analyzing empirical evidence – actions of the state and those of indigenous society. We then use the prism of citizenship to highlight the divergence within settler colonialism.

In the Israeli case, the state's political legitimacy relied in part on its claim of liberal democracy. This justificatory rhetoric created a set of expectations and subsequent demands on the part of those Palestinians who received or were about to receive Israeli citizenship. As historians, therefore, we conceive of citizenship in a settler colonial context as an empirical question, allowing historical actors to define and describe the possibilities and limitations they understood they had, their present, and their future. Shira Robinson has shown how Palestinian citizens of Israel utilized the language of democratic citizenship, «at least [as] a strategic decision to hold Israel accountable for its claim to be exercising the rule of law»[8]. Building on Robinson's analysis of the struggle for citizenship, the examples below demonstrate how Palestinians leveraged this citizenship as a platform for claim-making and protecting their rights.

Settler colonialism as an empirical category

Settler colonialism differs from other kinds of colonialism in the nature of the relationship between the indigenous population and the newly arriving colonists. Unlike a colonial system, which relies on a small cadre of bureaucrats from the colonial center, a settler colonial system is one in which an immigrant settler society, not merely the metropole, asserts sovereignty and dominance over resources at the expense of the indigenous society. One of the unique features of settler colonialism is the four-party relationship between «An imperial metropole where sovereignty formally resides, a local administration charged with maintaining order and authority, an indigenous population [...] and an often demanding and well-connected settler community»[9]. In the cases of French settlers in Algeria, Germans in British Tanganyika and Cameroon, and the Boers in South Africa, for example, there was no identity of interest between the state and the settlers. In the case of Israel/Palestine, this four-party division is relevant only for the mandate period, in which we distinguish between the British colonial state, its administration in Palestine, settler-colonial Zionist institutions and society, and indigenous Palestinian society.

[8] S.N. Robinson, *Citizen Strangers*, cit., p. 75.

[9] C. Elkins, S. Pederson, *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century: Projects, Practices, Legacies*, New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 4.

In this period, the settler-colonial Zionist project shared some interests with the colonial state but had its independent goals and means[10]. However, in the transition to the Israeli state, the interests of the state and those of the settlers converge, collapsing the set of relationships to a three-party one – between the state, the settler society, and the indigenous Palestinian population. None of these entities is monolithic; they are composed of different, sometimes competing elements that change over time. This characteristic renders this triangular relationship fraught with specific tensions around access to resources and the meaning of citizenship.

Comparative histories of settler colonialism offer multiple trajectories, demonstrating a spectrum of policies, structures, practices, and discourses, along which we can place the case of Palestine/Israel. The comparison to Algeria is often brought up in public and academic discussions[11]. This comparison is compelling. When examining the material dispossession of the indigenous population and the transfer of resources – particularly land – from the indigenous to the settler communities[12], the comparison is useful for tracing mechanisms and processes of appropriation. However, in Algeria, only a few thousand out of nine million Muslim Algerians ever received French citizenship, making it a marginal political category[13]. In contrast, Israel, albeit reluctantly, granted citizenship to most Palestinians who remained, and these Palestinians mobilized this citizenship to make substantial political demands. As the examples below demonstrate, the comparison with Algeria highlights important differences, presenting settler colonialism as a set of possibilities rather than a one-size-fits-all model.

The fact of Palestinians' citizenship in Israel is often invoked to dismiss the settler colonial nature of the Israeli political system, while the concept of settler colonialism is used to diminish the significance of Palestinians' citizenship in Israel[14]. The former perspective erases the power dynamics between settler and indigenous populations at the heart of the very definition of the state. The latter perspective sidelines Palestinian

[10] Even though there was a small indigenous Jewish community in Palestine, structurally – the British authorities and the Zionist movement referred to them as part of the Jewish political community in Palestine.

[11] On the conscious adoption of the Algerian model in early Zionist settlement see G. Shafir, *Land, Labour and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 1882-1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 50-51.

[12] See, for example, D. Prochaska, *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bone, 1870-1920*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

[13] Indigenous Algerian Jew received automatic French citizenship in 1870 out of colonial «divide and rule» considerations, further affirming the marginality of this category in this context. Further on the complexities of French citizenship in Algeria see: L. Blévis, *La citoyenneté française au miroir de la colonisation: étude des demandes de naturalisation des «sujets français» en Algérie coloniale*, «Genèses», 2003, 4; T. Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2006, pp. 19-54.

[14] E. Weizman, *The Anticolonial Settler: Reflections on Citizenship, Violence and Decolonisation*, «Citizenship Studies», 2022; L. Tatour, *Citizenship as Domination: Settler Colonialism and the Making of Palestinian Citizenship in Israel*, «The Arab Studies Journal», 2019, 2; A. Sabbagh-Khoury, *Citizenship as Accumulation by Dispossession: The Paradox of Settler Colonial Citizenship*, «Sociological Theory», 2022, 3.

agency in utilizing citizenship as a platform for claim-making and identity formation. By integrating these concepts into one empirical and conceptual discussion, we encourage historians of citizenship to consider settler colonial citizenship, in which dispossession coincides with formal citizenship[15]. At the same time, we argue that studies of settler colonialism must take this citizenship seriously, just as the historical actors did. Settler-colonial citizenship can thus be seen as a product of a tension within the settler colonial state, which allows the indigenous to make claims within the exclusionary space they inhabit.

Case studies

Both of us study the transition from the mandate period to Israeli statehood and the early years of the State of Israel. Almost eighty-five percent of Palestinians who inhabited the land that became Israel in 1948 were displaced by the settlers' actions, and the new state took over their land and resources for the benefit of the settler population[16]. Our focus here will be on those who stayed, about one hundred and sixty thousand Palestinians by 1949, most of whom were granted Israeli citizenship in 1952[17]. In our work, we employ settler colonialism as a historical category rather than a fixed model. We focus on the early years to highlight the fraught transition from the four-party to the three-party settler colonial structure, the lessons all parties implemented and adapted from the earlier colonial experience, and the processes through which both the state and indigenous society came to define their relationship to each other. Our empirical findings allow us to identify continuities and ruptures, as well as structural changes within the state.

Control of resources in Nazareth

The Israeli settler colonial policy of dispossessing Palestinians of their resources to benefit the Jewish settler population was expressed early on, in the policy of «Judaizing the Galilee». This policy sought to «dilute» the Arab majority concentration in the region, through increasing Jewish settlements in the Galilee[18]. In Nazareth, this manifested, among other things, in the state's attempt to control the city's water, transfer it to the Zionist-founded, quasi-official water company, *Mekorot*, and force the city to buy its water from it. The Nazareth municipality through the Mandate authorities, had drilled a water well on the city's outskirts, and it was in the process of connecting it to the city's water system to provide water to the thirsty city when the 1948 war broke out. Shortly after the city's occupation in July 1948, the municipality attempted to

[15] For an earlier conceptualization of settler colonial citizenship, see P. Ahluwalia, *When Does a Settler Become a Native? Citizenship and Identity in a Settler Society*, «Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies», 2001, 1.
[16] On the Nakba and displacement, see W. Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*, Washington, DC, Institute for Palestinian Studies, 1992.
[17] S.N. Robinson, *Citizen Strangers*, cit., p. 107.
[18] On Israeli Judaization policies, see G. Falah, *Israeli «Judaization» Policy in Galilee*, «Journal of Palestine Studies», 1991, 4; and O. Yiftachel, *Ethnocracy: The Politics of Judaizing Israel/Palestine*, «Constellations»,1999, 3.

complete that water project initiated. Israeli officials began pressuring the city, and the process was halted when Mekorot informed the Prime minister that the well was needed to solve the water problems of nearby Jewish settlements[19].

Dallasheh's research traces the contest that ensued over Nazareth's water project, ending in 1955 when Israeli officials imposed a regional water network owned by *Mekorot*, leaving the city at the mercy of the company. Despite this, Nazareth's residents and leaders continued to challenge *Mekorot*'s hegemony and demand their rights to water. The most outspoken critics were the newly elected municipal council members from MAKI (Communist Party of Israel), the only non-Zionist political party and the main opposition among Palestinians and within the country at the time. MAKI's opposition to *Mekorot* controlling Nazareth's water dates to the early days of this contest. Now, the party called to return to the city-owned water project and called on the municipality to appeal to the Supreme Court to challenge the government and *Mekorot*[20]. MAKI's council member, Khalil Khoury, appealed through the Party's newspaper: «We were all elected, Mr. mayor, [...] to guard the interests of the municipality and the people»[21].

MAKI was not alone. Even the government-affiliated mayor, facing local pressures, threatened to use the limited means under his disposal to combat the *Mekorot* takeover by turning to the public and the courts[22]. As the crisis continued, the mayor eventually used his strongest card vis-à-vis the Israeli state: the threat of MAKI's potential electoral victory. The Israeli authorities had prevented elections in Nazareth for years to avoid such an eventuality, but a prolonged Palestinian campaign forced them to allow elections in 1954. MAKI came very close to winning control of the city in those elections, and the mayor realized the government's interest in preserving the precarious anti-MAKI coalition they had practically forced. By August 1958, the mayor made it clear to officials that without a proper resolution to the water crisis, «he would have nothing to tell the voters» about his coalition's achievements during its term in the elections of 1959[23].

Thus, critically utilizing the settler colonial paradigm framework enables tracing the Israeli settler project of controlling land, people, and resources, while also highlighting the range of strategies that indigenous Palestinian citizens used to maintain ownership over resources and autonomy in managing them. This approach also reveals the fissures within the Israeli settler colonial project that not only enabled the long contestation but also provided Palestinians with the tools to leverage their citizenship to continue demanding their rights, even after the *Mekorot* project was forced on them[24].

[19] Letter from *Mekorot* to Prime minister, 16 September 1948, Israel State Archive, ISA/RG49/308/48.
[20] MAKI Leaflet, June 1956, YT-16-10-7-2(AJ).
[21] «Al-Ittihad», 12 October 1956.
[22] Letter from Mayor of Nazareth to minister of Interior, 18 June, 1956, ISA/RG50/2062/40
[23] Letter from Galilee Governor to minister of Interior, 6 August 1958, ISA/RG50/2062/40.
[24] L. Dallasheh, *Troubled Waters: Citizenship and Colonial Zionism in Nazareth*, «International Journal of Middle East Studies», 2015, 3.

Petitions to the minister of Minorities

The seriousness with which Palestinians regarded the category of citizenship is evident in the hundreds of letters sent to the short-lived Israeli ministry of Minorities (1948-1949) regarding the material dispossession of Palestinian movable property. During the Nakba, and more specifically during the war itself, Jewish soldiers and civilians looted or confiscated Palestinian movable property. Even before formal citizenship was enacted in 1952, those Palestinians who remained wrote to the ministry of Minorities and to other government authorities to protest this dispossession and demand restitution or compensation. These petitions built on a long tradition of petitioning those in power. Palestinians petitioned the Ottoman Sultan asking for his intervention, and later to the British Mandate authorities and to the League of Nations – demanding their rights as colonial citizens[25]. Written in Arabic or English, sometimes supplemented with a translation to Hebrew, many of the letters to Israeli authorities invoked Israel's promise of democracy and civil rights to bolster their claims.

Among the petitioners were peasants, who appealed for the return of their stolen or confiscated crops in the name of justice and democracy[26], or in the name of «the most basic citizenship rights»[27]. One merchant further stated, «[t]he leaders of the government of Israel have declared on several occasions that the minorities living in the State of Israel will enjoy the same rights as the Jews, that all their properties and goods will be safeguarded, and that any of the goods taken will be paid for»[28]. A garage owner from Haifa, that identified as a law-abiding and tax-paying citizen «of your nation», expressed confidence, saying, «I have faith you will justify [sic.] the wrong, and return the right to its owner, to enable us, as minorities and law-abiding citizens in the nation of Israel to accede with life formalities and duties»[29]. A merchant from Jaffa demanded restitution for his confiscated goods and asked for his demand to be considered, «especially since we are subjects of your democratic and just country, which – I believe – would not permit injustice – especially since we are minorities under Israeli flag»[30]. Although we do not know the outcome in these specific cases, restitution was very rare.

In these examples, Palestinians took Israeli claims of equal citizenship seriously, demanding that the state fulfil its democratic

[25] See, for example, Y. Ben Bassat, *Rural Reactions to Zionist Activity in Palestine before and after the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 as Reflected in Petitions to Istanbul*, «Middle Eastern studies», 2013, 3; N. Wheatley, *Mandatory Interpretation: Legal Hermeneutics and the New International Order in Arab and Jewish Petitions to the League of Nations*, «Past & present» 2015, 1; L. Banko, *The Invention of Palestinian Citizenship, 1918-1947*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

[26] Husayn Ibrahim Labad to the minister of Minorities, 25 March 1949, ISA G299/57.

[27] Ibrahim Habib Nashashibi to the minister of Minorities, 2 November 1949, ISA G299-83.

[28] Gead Suidan to the minister of Minorities, 4 August 1948, ISA G299/99.

[29] Anis Simaan Haddad to the minister of Minorities, 10 August 1948, ISA G/299/92.

[30] Khalil al-Luh to the minister of Minorities, 1 April 1949, ISA G/298/46.

promise. Understanding their status as a subordinated indigenous minority in a settler colonial state, they invoked concepts such as citizenship, civil and human rights, and democracy, referencing both the generalized promises embedded in the state's self-definition and specific promises made by military commanders or politicians. In some cases, petitioners used an admixture of contradictory terms – such as citizenship, democracy, and subject status. They conveyed awareness of their new status while also asserting a demand for citizenship rights. For Palestinian citizens, the settler colonial claim to democracy represented a promise, a source of disappointment, and a vision for future democratic citizenship.

Settler colonialism – A dynamic process

Both case studies conclude with the victory of the state. But despite the power disparity, this was not a foregone conclusion. Our examples exposed the internal contradictions within the settler colonial project, which was a formal democracy and which decided to grant citizenship to the remaining indigenous population. In our analysis, settler colonialism is not merely a structure, it is also a dynamic process. This perspective allows us to understand the structures at work and how actors function within them. Within this context of settler colonial dispossession, we present citizenship as one of the parameters shaping the triangular relationship between the state, the settlers, and the indigenous society. While the settler state endeavored to take possession of indigenous resources for the benefit of the dominant settler society, citizenship provided the indigenous Palestinians with a few tools for resilience and perseverance.

Our understanding of settler colonialism as a process and as a series of contingencies also informs our understanding of future possibilities in Palestine/Israel. While settler colonialism has long been part of both Zionist and Palestinian political imagination, even if not explicitly labeled as such, it does not mean that settler colonialism has a predetermined endpoint. The Algerian example offers valuable but limited insights as a comparative point for analyzing historical realities and as a blueprint for the future of Palestine and Israel. Settler colonialism does not follow a single scenario and inevitable trajectory. Our vision of pursuing decolonization and ending the settler colonial process in this context need not mirror Algeria-style decolonization.

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