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## Cosmopolitan Conversations: Settler Societies, Education and Decolonisation

John Docker

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**REVIEW ARTICLE**  
**COSMOPOLITAN CONVERSATIONS: SETTLER**  
**SOCIETIES, EDUCATION AND DECOLONISATION**

John Docker

Adjunct Senior Research Fellow  
Humanities Research Centre  
Old Canberra House (Building 73)  
Lennox Crossing  
Australian National University  
Canberra ACT 0200, Australia  
John.Docker@anu.edu.au

Duane Champagne and Ismael Abu-Saad (eds.), *Indigenous and Minority Education: International Perspectives on Empowerment* (Beersheba: Israel: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2005). Pp.394. Paperback.

Janice J. Terry, *U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Role of Lobbies and Special Interest Groups* (London and Ann Arbor, Mi: Pluto Press, 2005). Pp.160. Paperback.

In 1967, as the June Arab-Israeli war was ending, Maxime Rodinson, the noted French Jewish scholar of Islam and the Middle East (who died in 2004), published a remarkable essay 'Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?' as a supplement to a special number of Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes*. With characteristic intellectual power, clarity, and wit, Rodinson convincingly argued that Israel can be defined as a settler-colonial state established 'on Palestinian soil' – an 'outrage committed against the Arabs as a people'. Israel should, he concluded, be historically seen as part of a nineteenth and twentieth century European-American movement of colonial expansion across the world. Rodinson's intervention proved highly controversial at the time, with many also finding his rejection of 'Judeo-centrism' to be especially puzzling. In 1967 Sartre himself, Rodinson amusingly reports elsewhere, asked his friends to psychoanalyse him.<sup>1</sup>

1. Maxime Rodinson, *Israel: A Colonial-Settler State?* (New York: Monad Press, 1973),

Increasingly, the settler-colonial character of Zionism and Israel is being explored and delineated, including in comparative contexts of world-wide settler colonialism and ideas of decolonisation. In such contexts, settler societies are revealed to possess both distinctive features and shared characteristics. *Indigenous and Minority Education*, edited by Duane Champagne, a Native American scholar, and Ismael Abu-Saad, a Palestinian academic from Israel, is a fine example of such collaborative comparative study. The book represents a selection of papers from a conference on 'Education, Social Development and Empowerment among Indigenous Peoples and Minorities: International Perspectives', held at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheba, Israel, on 16-18 June 2004. The chapters range widely, drawing on feminist insights and with a strong concern for the position of women, including an interesting chapter by Yasemin Karakasoglu on 'Ethnic Minority Girls and Young Women in the German Educational System'.

My focus here, however, will not be on migration but on primary processes of colonisation of indigenous societies. In the opening chapter, which was given as a keynote address, Noeline Villebrun, as Dene National Chief and Vice-Chair of the Arctic Athabaskan Council of north-west Canada, says it is the first time a Dene National Chief has been a woman, and the first time a Dene National Chief has 'set foot in Palestine among the Bedouin People'. Villebrun passionately evokes common features of colonial encounters that resonate between colonisation in the Americas and Zionist-Israeli colonisation in the lands of Palestine. She notes what colonisers don't do: 'Whenever we are invited to come to someone else's land we do so with humility and care. We ask for permission of the people whose land we are on, we show respect, and we build relations ... We do these things because that is how we accept guests to our lands'. She stresses the fundamental importance of land in every aspect of her people's lives. She refers to 'cultural genocide' as the appropriate term to describe the consequences of assimilation, acculturation, the schooling that deprived the Dene of their history, and the 'colonising' Catholic and Protestant Churches that tried to destroy religious knowledge and forms of spirituality. She wishes decolonisation in education to respect Dene traditions and values.

Resistance to 'ethnic cleansing', 'politicide' or 'cultural genocide' as perpetrated by Israeli and North American colonisers, and the importance of maintaining historical consciousness, are features of the essays. In Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian's ethnographic essay 'Negotiating the Present and Historicizing the Future: Palestinian Students Speak about the Israeli Separation Wall', one student called Samer refers movingly to it as 'this

terrible and malignant cancer that has affected the crops of the beloved land of Canaan and destroyed the olives, the almonds and the bananas. It has separated the city, the camp and the village from their trees'. Shalhoub-Kevorkian, a senior lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Institute of Criminology, remarks on the children's and young people's resilience as well as their trauma.

The traumatic consequences of the coloniser's ever-insistent desire to dispossess the indigenous of their land emerges powerfully in Sarab Abu-Rabia-Queder's essay, 'Feminism and Post-Colonialism in the Arab-Bedouin Education System', where she discusses how, as a Bedouin female researcher herself, she struggled to work out how to conduct her study in terms of delicacies and sensitivities in interviewing girls and their parents. In investigating why the dropout rates from schools among Bedouin females are among Israel's highest, she calls attention to international law, whereby Israel is obliged to provide equal education in a non-discriminatory manner to both subsystems, Jewish and Arab: disregard of international law and its obligations can be added to the shared features of settler colonial societies everywhere, as emerges in references throughout the collection to the notorious 'Separation Wall'.

From 1948, Abu-Rabia-Queder points out, when the Bedouin who remained in the Negev were moved to a restricted military zone around Beersheba, the Israeli government, as part of its discriminatory policies, provided them with even fewer educational services than other Israeli Palestinians. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s the government has kept pressuring the Bedouin to leave their villages. The government says its aim is to modernise the Bedouin, yet never gives the necessary resources, especially in education. The Bedouins' discomfort with modernisation and their holding on to backward tradition is blamed for the high dropout rate of Bedouin students, particularly girls. Abu-Rabia-Queder proposes, however, from her conversations with the dropout students and their parents, that Bedouin traditional culture should be respected and integrated in the sphere of education, in particular, that there should be provision of separate sex-segregated Arab schools rather than the imposition of a modern universal unsegregated educational system. Such, she urges, would be an alternative *postcolonial* way to engage with the problem of female dropouts and would encourage equity and empowerment in the Arab-Bedouin community.

Many contributors point out that in the Israeli education system the Arab sector is completely and suffocatingly controlled by the Ministry of Education. In terms of languages, Abu-Rabia-Queder observes that 'Hebrew is taught as a second language in Arab schools, while Jewish students are not required to study Arabic'. However, at the tertiary level, Christa Bruhn, in her essay 'Higher Education as Empowerment: The Case

of Palestinian Universities', contends that Palestinian universities, despite Israeli harassment, have inspired Palestinian communities to define and articulate a Palestinian national identity, resist the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and prepare for a Palestinian state.

In terms of political contours, As'ad Ghanem, Chair of Haifa University's Department of Political Science, in his insightful essay 'Collective Rights and Education: Lessons from Quebec in Canada', refers to the concept of 'ethnocracy', where a society represents itself as democratic while facilitating an undemocratic expansion of the dominant ethno-nation. Examples of such ethnocratic regimes, he suggests, at present include Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Estonia, Latvia, Serbia, Israel, and Canada until the 1960s. Ghanem argues that structural tensions between ethnocracy and democracy tend to generate chronic political instability. In his essay 'Education and Identity Formation among Indigenous Palestinian Arab Youth in Israel', Ismael Abu-Saad also discusses Israel as an 'ethnocracy' and 'ethnic state'. (One is reminded here of Baruch Kimmerling's contention in *Politicide*<sup>2</sup> that Israel, like the former apartheid South Africa, is a *herrenvolk* democracy: democracy of the superior race/ethnic group).

Writers in the volume also suggest that the establishment of Israel as a 'Jewish State' is an extreme development of the notion of an ethnocratic democracy. As Ismael Abu-Saad points out, Israel as a Jewish State means that its Palestinian citizens (one in every five Israelis) are necessarily and effectively excluded from the state's identity, superstructure, and power centres. In his essay 'Law, Education and Social Change: The Case of Palestinian Arab Education in Israel', Yousef Jabareen also writes that Israel's definition as a Jewish State means that the Palestinian citizens are always treated as second-class citizens, excluded from public life and the public sphere, and obliged to live with shocking inequalities. But, he goes on to observe, what is 'perhaps most shocking' is the 'apathy' of Israeli society in relation to Palestinian disadvantage – an indifference that must, one thinks, flow directly on from the original decision to define Israel as a Jewish State, an ethnocracy.

*Indigenous and Minority Education* is a stimulating collection because of the interfacing of international comparative perspectives. I might permit myself, however, a mild moment of irritation. In her chapter 'Hear the Silenced Voices and Make that Relationship: Issues of Relational Ethics and Empowerment in Aboriginal Contexts', concerning her research experiences with Aboriginal people in Canada and the United States, Nathalie Piquemal invokes French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) when reflecting on the responsibilities of the ethnographic researcher in relation to colonised peoples (she conducted a three year

2. Baruch Kimmerling, *Politicide: Ariel Sharon's War Against the Palestinians* (London: Verso, 2003)

study in collaboration with Paiute-Shoshone Tribes in Nevada). ‘Levinas’, Piquemal enthuses,

suggests that an ethical relationship is based on a commitment to difference in that the other’s identity is not interchangeable with mine. Living ethically with the other means co-existing with the other while allowing him/her to preserve his/her irreducible otherness.

This is an interesting translation, as it were, of Levinas. As far back as 1982, in the wake of the Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon, Levinas had admitted in an interview ‘Ethics and Politics’ (reprinted in *The Levinas Reader* edited by Seán Hand) – and rather to the astonishment of the person interviewing him – that he did not view the Palestinian as an *Other*. Rather, he adamantly affirmed, the *Other* for him is a figure who exists primarily within one’s own religion and ethnos, amongst neighbours and kin; he strongly reaffirms his faith in Zionism and the Israeli state. Levinas here records his approval of the ethnocentrism of Israel – of Israel as a Jewish State – and of the accompanying nationalism and settler colonialism that so many other contributors to the collection see as responsible for the discriminations against and sufferings of the Palestinian people. If Levinas refuses to see the Palestinian as *Other*, then he is refusing any ethical relationship between coloniser and colonised. For Levinas in this interview, and in his philosophy that emphasises the face-to-face relationship as the site of responsibility, care for the *Other* occurs within the circle of colonisers, in their relations with each other. As for the phrase ‘him/her’ it is well-known that Levinas regarded the subject of philosophy as male. In *The Second Sex* (1949) Simone de Beauvoir, in an early feminist criticism, commented that Levinas ‘deliberately takes a man’s point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of subject and object’.<sup>3</sup> I here make a heartfelt plea: instead of facile references to Levinas as the exemplary ‘ethical philosopher’ of difference, why not stage a confrontation between his supposed ethics of responsibility to the *Other*, and his professed ethnocentrism and chauvinism?

In Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian’s essay, a student Manal writes:

Israel has surpassed the international limits in oppression and terrorism. The United States doesn’t care anymore because they are Israel’s number one supporter. It lets it do whatever it wants ... What kind of a State makes decisions without caring about the consequences; it kills, arrests and displaces.

In *U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, the historian Janice J. Terry focuses on the Ford and Carter presidencies, tracing the lobbying by Zionist groups

3. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (1949; London Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1975), p.16 note one.

such as AIPAC, that has contributed, along with the anti-Arab media and popular culture, to both Democratic and Republican governments, blindly supporting Israeli lawlessness. In so doing, she brings to the fore the question, what kind of state is the USA? Terry accepts that the US is a 'relatively open and free society' (14). Yet when *U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East* points out that the US President is becoming increasingly 'imperial', how few Americans vote, how generally acquiescent the media is and inadequate its coverage of international issues, how ignorant of the world most Americans are, how difficult it is for anyone openly to criticise Zionism and Israel and not have their careers destroyed, we might rather say that the US is a relatively unopen and unfree society, or simply not a free society at all.<sup>4</sup> Terry's book tells a depressing story, of a world-power almost monolithically pro-Israeli and anti-Muslim, and when she takes the story to the present, it is even more depressing. Yet, unfortunately, I have to confess to finding Terry's book rather lacklustre. It is top-down history, predictable, as if distant from its subject, missing the intimate contact with people's lives in circumstances of suffering, trauma, and resilience, that makes reading *Indigenous and Minority Education* so absorbing an experience.

4. Cf. John Docker, 'Is the United States a Failed Society?' *Borderlands* E-journal, vol.4, no.1, 2005.