Racism After Apartheid

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SETTLER COLONIALISM

In the last decade settler colonialism has gained currency as a new field of study. It identifies a cluster of societies in which colonial rule was combined with large-scale immigration of European settlers. Politically, it allows us to focus on resilient forms of domination that serve the interests of settlers who made a new home for themselves in overseas territories. Facing resistance from indigenous people, settler societies were shaped by ongoing political conflict. This provided them with common features and a sense of shared destiny, based on the similar challenges they faced. Solidarity between those at the losing end – indigenous groups, slaves and other people marginalised through this form of colonial rule – is the counterpart of the process (Davis 2016). At the same time, the extent to which the concept serves a useful purpose in historical and theoretical analysis is less obvious. I argue here that its utility in these respects is limited (Bhandar and Ziadah 2016; Greenstein 2016).
What is the problem with settler colonialism as a historical concept? Its strongest point is also its weakest: it is applicable to cases that exhibit a great diversity of conditions. It is applied to societies that saw settlers overwhelm the indigenous population to the point that it became demographically and economically marginal: two to three per cent of the population in the US, Canada and Australia. In other places – Kenya, Rhodesia, Algeria, Mozambique and South Africa – indigenous people remained the bulk of the population and the main source of labour. Slavery featured in some cases, such as the US and early colonial South Africa, but not in others. European settlers retained legal and political links to the mother country in Algeria, Kenya, Rhodesia and Portugal’s African colonies but became independent in the US, South Africa and other British territories, often as a result of a violent intra-colonial conflict.

In some countries, most settlers left the territory after independence – Algeria, Mozambique, Angola and Rhodesia – but substantial numbers stayed in other places such as Namibia and South Africa. And, of course, where they became numerically dominant, settlers used their political independence to consolidate their rule and marginalise ‘natives’ further, but also to incorporate them into the new polity once they ceased posing a demographic threat to settler domination. This contrasts with the retention of legal-racial divisions in places where indigenous people remained a majority of the population.

Resistance strategies differed as well: attempts by natives to integrate as individuals on an equal basis in some societies, maintenance of pre-colonial identities and modes of organisation in others, formation of nationalist movements on the new ground created by colonial settlement, a focus on race, all with varying degrees of recognising settlers as legitimate members of the envisaged liberated society.

It is not only the broad contours of history that vary greatly in settler colonial societies but also patterns of social change over time. Constant geographical expansion while driving out indigenous people in some places such as the US and Australia, constant expansion while incorporating indigenous people as labour power in others, South Africa most notably, initial takeover of the entire territory with more or less fixed relations of subordination throughout the period (Algeria, Kenya, Rhodesia, Namibia). The diverse dynamics coexisted with different degrees of incorporation of ‘urban natives’ in a relatively privileged position compared to rural populations, and different combinations of direct and indirect rule. These continued to affect the evolution of societies in the post-colonial period (Mamdani 1996).
The concept of settler colonialism, then, is compatible with different demographic ratios, different trajectories of indigenous-settler relations, different relations between settlers and metropolitan centres, different destinies of settlers in the post-colonial period, and different social structures, ranging from reliance on free white labour, indentured immigrant labour – from Europe, India, China – to African slavery, indigenous labour subordination, and many combinations of the above. In short, settler-colonial societies do not move in a similar direction, be it the consolidation of settler rule or its demise through indigenous resistance.

In the absence of a unique historical trajectory, does settler colonialism display perhaps specific conceptual features? That is to say, does it work as a theoretical model? Does it outline distinct ways in which theoretical forces, such as class, race, ethnicity, state, power, ideology, space and time, are manifested concretely or intersect with one another? If we pose the question in this way, the conclusion seems unavoidable: settler colonialism as a model does not establish any specific social-theoretical dynamics unique to it, which may serve to distinguish it analytically, not just descriptively, from other types of societies, be they colonial or not.

Since settler colonialism has no specific historical or theoretical dynamics, how do we deal with societies that fall within its definition? As an alternative method of investigation, I suggest a strategy of addressing the multiplicity of colonial and post-colonial societies with a three-track approach:

- Studying them in their full historical specificity without imposing artificial boundaries between classes;
- Deploying general analytical concepts instead of developing idiosyncratic models (such as ‘colonialism of a special type’, ‘ethnic democracy combined with protracted military occupation’, ‘exclusionary colonialism’, or ‘regimes of separation’), which may serve as useful political labels but are theoretically without predictive value; and
- Engaging in selected comparisons in order to highlight general and unique features by examining them against each other.

To illustrate this approach, I apply it here to the case of Israel/Palestine. In what ways does it offer a useful prospect for historical analysis? Is the concept of apartheid, increasingly applied to this case, a good conceptual substitute for settler colonialism?
THE 1948 NAKBA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Israeli state officials and their supporters overseas invoke the notion of ‘singling out’ as a problem in analyses and campaigns aimed to address oppressive Israeli practices, frequently seen as colonial in nature. They do not necessarily reject all criticism of government policies, but they explain these away as results of a difficult security situation that calls for restrictive measures of a limited and temporary nature. Such measures, the argument goes, are not unique to Israel. They can be found in many places throughout the world. Why regard Israel, then, as a unique state deserving of special treatment?

To answer that, let us start with 1948. On the face of it, that year saw a war between two communities, each trying to gain control of as much land and power as possible from the departing British forces. The Jewish side managed to acquire a larger territory and to evict many of the Palestinians who resided there, sending them to areas under the control of Arab forces. It was a messy outcome but no different in essence from that of other conflicts unfolding under similar circumstances: Turkey and Greece in the aftermath of the First World War, Czechoslovakia and Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War, India and Pakistan in the aftermath of the 1947 Partition that ended colonial rule on the subcontinent.

The similarities between all these situations as pointed out by this mainstream version of history are real enough, but three crucial differences make the case of the Nakba (the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestinians) distinctive:

- The Nakba involved the displacement of indigenous people by recently arrived settler immigrants. In the other cases above, those involved were equally indigenous: they had coexisted in the same territory for centuries.
- The Nakba affected almost exclusively one side: for every Jew in Palestine displaced in the war there were hundreds of Palestinians. In other cases, displacement of populations was usually mutual. Jews were indeed displaced from other Arab countries, but not by Palestinians, not at their behest or on their behalf.
- The Nakba saw the displacement of 80 per cent of the Arab population residing in what became Israel (60 per cent of the overall Palestinian population), and their replacement by Jewish immigrants from East Europe and the Middle East. In other cases, only a small segment on either side
of the divide was involved, perhaps two to three per cent of the total. The bulk of the population was not affected directly.

Putting all this together makes it clear that the partition of Palestine and subsequent war resulted in the destruction of indigenous society and the rise of a settler-dominated society in its place (Khalidi 2006; Morris 2004; Pappé 2006).

This was not a coincidence, a series of unfortunate events, or an outcome of chaotic war conditions. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Jewish settlement project in Palestine, led by the Zionist movement, embarked on building an ever-expanding zone of exclusion from which all local Arabs were barred. Tenants were not allowed to stay on land bought by settlement agencies, nor were Palestinians accepted as residents in new rural Jewish communities or urban neighbourhoods. The campaigns for Conquest of Land and Conquest of Labour were not always or completely successful, but they did set in motion exclusionary dynamics aimed to remove Arab workers from Jewish-owned enterprises, and eliminate (or at least reduce) dependence on Palestinian agricultural produce. The British imperial authorities facilitated this process.

The motivation behind that had nothing to do with ‘security’. Rather, the goal of the project was to build up a society in which Jews would be in control of their own affairs, overcoming their status elsewhere as a minority. Importantly, it was not an inevitable outcome of Jewish settlement as such. In the first Jewish immigration wave from 1882 to 1904, known as the First Aliyah, settlers made extensive use of local Arab labour, in the fields and at homes, in a pattern familiar from cases of European overseas expansion, such as Algeria, Kenya and South Africa. But, with a difference: the small scale of the project and its unfolding under the framework of an indigenous political order – the Ottoman Empire – meant that it had limited impact on local society. From the perspective of the Zionist movement, that pattern had a basic flaw. It limited employment opportunities for potential Jewish workers and therefore was not conducive for large-scale immigration and settlement.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, under the impact of the Zionist labour movement and against resistance from private Jewish farming interests, a new pattern of settlement had begun to dominate the process. It was based on job reservation for Jewish immigrants, which resulted in the eviction of cheaper and more productive Arab workers. It was followed by
experimentation with collective forms of economic production, especially in agriculture, to allow more efficient use of resources in competition with local Arab producers (Shafir 1989; Sternhell 1999).

This shift was driven ideologically by socialist-oriented activists, who called for the ‘normalisation’ of Jewish existence, grounding it in productive labour – agriculture and industry. Strong political commitment and financial subsidies were required to sustain this effort, made possible by mobilising resources from numerous overseas-based individual supporters. Still a marginal perspective during the Ottoman period, the drive to base the Zionist project on the recruitment, training and deployment of large numbers of workers was given a boost with the transition to British rule and the launch of a ‘Jewish national home’ policy in the aftermath of the First World War.

The notion advanced by the Communist International, that the big Jewish bourgeoisie was driving the Zionist project, was devoid of substance. Such a class did not exist as a coherent entity and Jewish capitalists usually found more profitable avenues elsewhere for their investments. Diplomatic and military support by global powers, the British Empire first and the US later on, ensured the survival and success of the project against substantial odds. These factors allowed settlers to overcome constraints imposed by the need to maintain economic profitability. Thus it could override local class imperatives by relying on external resources made available due to ideological and strategic reasons.

The core elements of the emerging society had been put in place by 1948, and the war that year served to consolidate them further. Before then, land transfers and the eviction of Arab tenants and workers were limited by British administrative regulations and the lack of settler coercive capacity. But once the British departed from the scene, Israeli political independence and access to superior military force allowed the new state the freedom to pursue policies of ethnic cleansing and land dispossession on a massive scale. The Nakba took place three years after the end of the Second World War and the Holocaust, giving the Israeli side a sense of moral justification, bordering on impunity, to do whatever it took to ensure national survival.

The ethnic cleansing of 1948 shaped Israeli society in several ways that remain of crucial importance today, and account for its particular ethnic stratification patterns:

- By removing the bulk of the indigenous population it ensured that Jews became the undisputed majority and occupied a dominant position in
society. From that point on, the new demographic status quo became a shared platform for all mainstream forces, from the hard right and religious orthodox parties to liberal and left-wing Zionists. It mandated unwavering support for the Law of Return for Jews, and resolute opposition to the Right of Return of Palestinian refugees. The notion of Israel as a ‘Jewish democratic state’ rests on this foundation, which became part of the global diplomatic consensus on the issue.

- By reducing the proportion of internal Palestinians to 15–20 per cent of all Israelis (and a similar percentage of all Palestinians), it entrenched their status as a minority, but also facilitated their incorporation as citizens. This would not have been possible had they remained a larger part of the population. From a truncated community, left defeated, without leadership and socially marginalised, they managed to consolidate themselves over the years into a self-conscious and unified minority, powerfully asserting their rights.

- By creating a large population of refugees across the borders (and even within them – the ‘present absentees’, internally displaced citizens), it ensured a state of permanent tension, requiring constant vigilance, militarisation and enhanced security consciousness, all of which became essential features of public life in Israel. On the Palestinian side, it created a political adversary located primarily outside the territory it sought to liberate, an unprecedented situation in the history of anti-colonial movements.

- Finally, by emptying parts of the country of their Arab population, it created both the space needed to settle new immigrants and the necessity for large numbers of people to fill in the resulting gaps, both geographical and social. Mizrahim (‘Oriental’ Jews from the Middle East and North Africa) were one group the state could access and manipulate with relative ease to play the roles of demographic barrier, cheap labour force and cannon fodder. Growing xenophobic sentiments among Arab nationalist movements and states contributed to the dislocation of Jewish communities into Israel in the post-1948 period. A new ethnic hierarchy thus emerged, affecting internal relations and the broader conflict.

In all these respects, the legacy of the 1948 war is alive. Of crucial importance is the excluded presence of the refugees, a spectre that permanently haunts Israeli society, not by directly shaping people’s consciousness – many
are not even aware of its existence—by nurturing an ever-present siege mentality, expectations of doom and fears of imminent destruction. Not only must all precedents for the return of refugees be denied (even if they are Israeli citizens, as in those from the destroyed Galilee villages of Bir’im and Iqrit), but the impulse that led to the Nakba in the first place continues to be at work. House demolitions, land confiscations, forced removals of Bedouin communities on both sides of the Green Line, no recognition of informal Palestinian settlements and planning restrictions in formal settlements, denial of residence rights to Palestinian spouses of Israeli citizens—these policies are not as dramatic as those of 1948 but share the same imperative: to restrict and reduce the size, spread and capacity of the Palestinian population.

Bearing the brunt of such policies most intensely, however, are neither Palestinian citizens of Israel nor refugees living outside its boundaries. Rather it is another population segment that was added to the picture in 1967: residents of the territories occupied in that year—the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

1967 AND ITS AFTERMATH

The 1967 war reaffirmed but also reversed some of the trends set in motion in 1948. The overall policy thrust was kept in place: incorporation of land, exclusion of people. But, this time it was with a difference. People beyond the Green Line, who fell under Israeli control in 1967, for the most part stayed put in their homes, villages and towns. With the exception of refugees from 1948, many of whom were subjected to another forced removal into Jordan, residents were spared the ethnic cleansing widely experienced in 1948. However, they were not granted citizenship rights. Some of them were incorporated into the Israeli labour market but in a limited and temporary manner as commuting workers in marginal industries. This mode of exclusionary inclusion brought about changes in the nature of the Israeli regime and its relations with its Palestinian subjects, with implications for democracy, demography, diplomacy and social divisions (Azoulay and Ophir 2012; Gordon 2008).

Let us start with democracy. Even if we ignore the physically excluded refugees, who obviously had no say in the way Israel was governed and were denied any political rights within its boundaries, before 1967 Israeli democracy was seriously deficient. Despite being granted voting rights, the majority of Palestinian citizens were subjected to military rule, which placed restrictions on their ability
to move, have access to land and jobs, and organise freely. Arab nationalist associations were banned, teachers had to be vetted by the security forces, a network of informers kept watch on subversive activists (basically, anyone engaged in any form of protest), and political dissent was punished (Jiryis 1976).

With all these limitations, avenues of oppositional political expression remained open, above all in the shape of the Israeli Communist Party (known as Maki, and from 1965 as Rakah), which combined parliamentary and popular mobilisation. It grew to become the dominant force among Palestinian citizens in the decade following 1967, while remaining a marginal player on the broader political scene.

In comparison, residents of the 1967 territories were treated with far less concern with regard to nominal democratic notions and practices: thousands of activists who engaged in resistance were arrested or deported, political publications and associations were banned and, above all, no prospect of being granted citizenship ever existed. Over a million people (initially), 25–30 per cent of the total Palestinian population, were left with no access to basic human, civil and political rights. Their numbers grew over the years to reach four million, but their prospects of freedom from Israel or freedom within Israel, indeed any rights within the system of Israeli control, remain today as remote as ever.

For the last half a century, then, the Israeli regime has combined formal democracy within part of its territory and repressive rule backed by military force – making any participation by the local population impossible – in another part. Under these conditions, its democratic pretensions cannot be taken seriously. The only claim to international legality made by this regime is that it is temporary in nature, but after more than 50 years of rule this is not tenable any longer, if it ever was. Willing neither to terminate its control by withdrawing from the occupied territories, nor to grant their residents equal rights or contemplate any route towards that, Israel has entrenched a system of domination without parallel elsewhere in the world today.

Changing demography is both a cause and effect of this regime. The number of Palestinians under Israeli control tripled with the 1967 occupation. There was no way to incorporate them as equals without undermining the state as a mechanism in the service of Jewish exclusivity, a problem that became known as the demographic threat. The attempted ‘solution’ combined three elements: denial of citizenship rights to residents of the occupied territories; steps to reduce their numbers; and increased Jewish immigration into the country. The latter two were not sufficiently successful. A repeat of the ethnic cleansing of
1948 was not possible: the 1967 war was much shorter and more visible to the media. Further, having learnt the lesson of the Nakba, people realised that any departure from their homes would prove irreversible.

Most of those who fled or were expelled to Jordan in 1967 were second-time refugees from the 1948 period (Raz 2012). Constant bureaucratic harassment made it difficult for many others to retain residence if they left the country at any point, but the bulk of them remained in place. Large-scale Jewish immigration has taken place over the years, especially from the Soviet Union, but it only alleviated the demographic problem, not solved it. The proportions of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs in the entire area under Israeli control hovered around 50 per cent for years.

The remaining option was to intensify the exclusion of Palestinians in the occupied territories and at the same time enhance the Jewish nature of the state. Many Palestinian workers from the territories were employed in sectors such as construction and agriculture, but their labour was never crucial to the leading industrial and high-tech sectors of the economy. The growing globalisation of labour supply in recent decades allowed Israel to replace locals with foreign workers, primarily from East Europe and South-East Asia. Since the first Gulf War in 1991, processes of labour displacement/replacement continued apace, facilitated by changing international conditions: the re-emergence of ethno-nationalism in Europe, the attacks of 11 September 2001 and growing anti-Islamic sentiments in the west, and the collapse of the traditional state order in the Middle East due to external interventions and internal revolts.

The main demographic project of the Israeli state thus involves accelerated inclusion of land coupled with growing exclusion of (non-Jewish) people. Palestinians cannot be removed en masse from the country, but their position can be diminished conceptually and legally through administrative means. The ongoing settlement project, land confiscation and fragmentation of the West Bank, and the siege on Gaza are well known, but the efforts go beyond that: admission committees in new settlements within the Green Line, ensuring they remain open in practice to Jews only; the nation-state bill, aimed to entrench exclusive Jewish claim to the country, its symbols and public spaces; forced resettlement of Bedouins in Israel and the West Bank; allocation of funds to enhance exclusionary Jewish identity at schools and forge links with the Jewish diaspora – sending young Israelis to Holocaust-themed sites in Europe, bringing young western Jews on trips to discover their ‘birthright’ in Israel – the list goes on.
Diplomacy is essential to sustain the legitimacy of these efforts. Based on the deliberately misleading notion that there is a genuine ‘peace process’ aimed at reaching agreement on a two-state solution, it allows no alternative approach to disrupt it. That the two powers most insistent on this idea are Israel and the US, after decades of resolute opposition to the mere mention of Palestinian statehood, is telling. Even the European Union, which has followed US diplomacy loyally for years, is beginning to explore other diplomatic and legal means to end the occupation. This also applies to the Palestinian Authority, though in a more hesitant manner due to its dependence on the very same powers intent on its continued subordination.

But the process is doomed. Nothing can possibly come out of another round of negotiations. This is plain for all to see – Israeli mainstream political debate has relegated the issue to the back burner, and the current government, or any other in sight, makes no effort to revive the process, beyond occasional token statements. The sole function of the two-state discourse today is to entrench the status quo and prevent a search for alternatives. Are there any serious forces willing and able to pick up the challenge of formulating a different way forward?

Divisions of a socio-political nature are crucial to the answer to this question, with a focus on two groups that stand at the intersection of the Jewish-Arab divide. The role of one of them is straightforward. Palestinian citizens of Israel are the only segment of the population of the entire country that is fully bilingual and immersed in cultural and social realities on all sides. They suffer from enough socio-economic and legal disadvantages – relative to other Israelis – to position them against the regime, but also enjoy enough privileges – relative to other Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza – to enable them to organise effectively within the system and on its margins. They can act as a powerful catalyst for regime change. The formation of a unified electoral front – the Joint List – in 2015, and its possible move beyond parliamentary politics to engage in mass action and social mobilisation, is a promising sign of what is yet to come.

Social inequality, including class exploitation, is an important dimension of the position of Palestinians in Israel. As the 2007 Haifa Declaration, one of the Vision Documents guiding their collective struggle, says: ‘The state has exercised against us institutional discrimination in various fields of life such as housing, employment, education, development, and allocation of resources’ (Mada al-Carmel 2007: 18). Labour issues have not been central to the Palestinian struggle inside the Green Line, however, with its focus on legal and political rights. Land, on the other
hand, has been crucial as a national asset, and a major point of political contention, in addition to its obvious relevance for material production and economic prosperity. Holding on to what was left after wars and occupation became a central principle of the strategy of Sumud, steadfastness or perseverance by staying put, physically and symbolically, on both sides of the Green Line.

The other segment of the population to consider here presents a complex picture (Greenstein 2015a). As noted earlier, Mizrahim were brought to Israel to fill the gaps left by the Nakba. To gain admission as legitimate members of the dominant European-oriented Jewish group, they had to leave their Arab cultural heritage behind. With the exception of small groups of intellectuals in Iraq and Egypt, identification with Arab nationalism and active opposition to Zionism were rare among Middle Eastern Jews in the pre-1948 period, and unknown in North African communities. The Jewish masses spoke local dialects of Arabic and other regional languages. They were similar in their daily practices to their Muslim and Christian neighbours, all of whom identified largely in traditional religious terms. Referring to them anachronistically as ‘Arab Jews’ is misleading. They rarely joined the political revival that formed the basis for the Arab national movement, which began to flourish after the First World War, and they continued to adhere to the pre-war mode of communal organisation prevalent in the Ottoman Empire.

Post-Ottoman realities saw Middle Eastern Jews positioned uncomfortably between two competing modes of nationalist identification – Zionism and Arabism – both of which were at odds with their pre-existing identities, and neither of which allowed for ambiguity or dual loyalties. The dilemma was resolved in the decade after Israel’s establishment through the mass migration, under duress, of hundreds of thousands of Jews from all over the Middle East and North Africa to Israel. Most of them were forced to abandon their property and arrived at their destination with limited assets. Cultural disadvantage – they were regarded by Ashkenazi (East and central European) Jews in charge of the state as primitive, lacking in culture and education – together with material deprivation and social discrimination made them easy to manipulate and control. Many were sent to remote areas along the borders, with access to inferior education and fewer opportunities to find decent jobs. Others found themselves in ‘development towns’ created as new industrial zones relying on cheap labour, and in poor city neighbourhoods whose former Arab residents had become refugees.

Although living conditions placed them next to Palestinian citizens in the bottom rungs of Israeli society, Mizrahim had one precious asset – Jewish
identity. Focusing on what they shared with other Jews, and distancing themselves from what set them apart and brought them closer to the enemy – Arab cultural background – made strategic sense. Mizrahi identity developed in Israel as a coping mechanism to deal with social marginalisation that had clear intra-ethnic undertones. The humiliating process of absorption in Israel created deep resentment against the establishment, which was led by the Labour Party. It took a generation for this attitude to consolidate into a full-fledged rejection of Labour and transfer of political allegiance to the ultra-nationalist, right-wing alternative, led by Menahem Begin. Having put greater emphasis on traditional Jewish components of identity, at the expense of the secular Israeli component associated with liberal elites, the right wing managed to increase its support among Mizrahim after 1967. This culminated with the 1977 upheaval that brought Begin's Likud Bloc to power.

It is important to realise that right-wing views, including hostility to Palestinians and other Arabs, based on xenophobia or desire for historical revenge, were not the primary reason for the support the Mizrahim granted Likud. Rather, it was the sense that Likud regarded them as equal Jewish citizens, free of the condescending attitudes they had experienced from the Labour-affiliated establishment that moved them to adopt Likud's right-wing agenda.

Initially, issues of historical redress, ethnic pride and access to social services were at the forefront of the political realignment. But the Likud and its new partners – the post-1967 religious-nationalist messianic settlers – had other priorities. Once Egypt signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1978, and the rejectionist Arab Steadfastness and Confrontation Front collapsed with the Iraq-Iran war, the road was clear for the Israeli nationalist-religious alliance to pursue its agenda in an accelerated manner: the massive project of Jewish settlement of the West Bank rapidly gained ground, the first Lebanon war erupted in 1982, followed by prolonged resistance, and the first Palestinian Intifada (uprising) broke out in the occupied territories in the late 1980s. All these contributed to retaining a focus on ‘security’ issues, with the social redress agenda taking a back seat.

By that time, the Mizrahi support for the right wing had become consolidated. The historical resentment towards the Labour establishment translated into hostility towards policies and discourses associated with Ashkenazi elites, who continued to treat Mizrahim with arrogance. These elites were accused of caring more for outsiders (Palestinians, refugees) than for their ‘own’ people. They lost political power in 1977, but retained control over media, academia
and culture. Transforming these spheres and demoting the old elites became a goal common for Mizrahi activists, the right wing and the settler movement, though they came at the issue from different directions. Reinforcing the Jewish nature of the state against liberal notions of universal human rights, civil equality and western-style democracy, which threaten to transform Israel into a ‘normal’ state, has become the ideological unifying battle cry in this campaign.

This background explains why class relations on their own have not led to alliances between social groups that stand in different positions within the Israeli legal-political hierarchy. The principal Jewish-Arab divide in society presents a serious obstacle for mobilisation on grounds that might call for joint action under normal circumstances, let alone mobilisation with an explicit political content. The largest mass movement in recent years, the 2011 tent protests, which focused on housing and cost of living issues, inspired by the Arab Spring, saw hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens marching in the streets to demand social justice, but shying away from addressing the occupation, or welcoming Palestinian citizens. Socially and culturally marginalised Jews – of Mizrahi, Ethiopian, Russian origins – felt out of place in what was seen as a protest led by the educated, mostly Ashkenazi middle classes.

THE REGIME AND RESISTANCE: MODELS AND ALTERNATIVES

How can we characterise the socio-political system that emerged from these processes? It has been referred to as settler-colonial but, as discussed earlier, this term covers many different situations and is too vague to be of use in historically grounded analysis. It fails to capture specific features that are essential both for understanding the dynamics of the system as well as the ways in which it could be changed. The ongoing centrality of the land issue, though, does attest to the legacy of colonialism and resistance to it.

Apartheid is a concept of greater relevance, capturing the power relations and conflict over resources between different groups that inhabit the same space and state structures. The definition of apartheid in the 2002 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court – ‘an institutionalised regime of systematic oppression and domination’ of one group over another – applies to
Israel (UNGA 1998: 5). Two key features, however, set Israel apart from South African apartheid:

- The Israeli system is based on the exclusion of indigenous people as the main providers of labour, while South African apartheid was based on the exploitation of black labour power as the mainstay of a white-dominated economy and society. This difference has implications not only for our understanding of the regime but also for resistance. The key role played by the internal mass movement, led by black trade unions, which resulted in the demise of apartheid in South Africa, cannot be replicated in Israel/Palestine. An alternative configuration of internal and external forces must be found instead.
- The unique position of the Mizrahim – a settler group indigenous to the broader region, which shares cultural background with Palestinians but has no common political consciousness with them – is without equivalence in South Africa. Mizrahim have gone through decades of cultural and political assimilation into Israeli society, and expectations that they could have retained an Arab identity, even if in a dormant form, are delusional. At the same time, no political change would be possible without them. How to shatter their alliance with the right wing is the crucial political challenge in Israel today.

This system may be called ‘apartheid of a special type’ to capture both the similarities and the differences between it and historical apartheid in South Africa (Greenstein 2015b). The real challenge though, is not to find elegant terminology but to fill it with concrete content for analysis and action. The political implications of the analysis are of particular concern.

What are some of the characteristics of this system?

- It is based on an ethno-national distinction between Jewish insiders and Palestinian Arab outsiders. This distinction has a religious dimension – the only way to join the Jewish group is through conversion – but is not affected by degree of religious adherence.
- It uses this distinction to expand citizenship beyond its territory, potentially to all Jews, and to restrict citizenship within it: Palestinian residents of the 1967 occupied territories, and the 1948 refugees beyond them, are not and cannot become citizens. Thus, the state is open to all non-resident
members of one group, wherever they are and regardless of their personal history and links to the territory. It is closed to all non-resident members of the other group wherever they are and regardless of personal history and links to the territory.

- It is based on the blurring of physical boundaries. At no point in its 70 years of existence have its boundaries been fixed by law. They are permanently temporary. And, they are asymmetrical: porous in one direction, expanding military forces and settlers into adjacent territories, and impermeable in another direction: severe restrictions or prohibition on entry of Palestinians – from the occupied territories and the diaspora – into its territories.

- It combines different modes of rule: civilian authority with formal democratic institutions within the Green Line, and military authority beyond it. In times of crisis, a military mode spills over to apply to Palestinian citizens. At all times, a civilian mode spills over to apply to Jews residing beyond the Green Line. The distinction between the two sides of the Line is eroding as a result; norms and practices of the occupation filter back into Israel: the Jewish democratic state is ‘democratic’ for Jews and ‘Jewish’ for Arabs.

- It is in fact a Jewish demographic state. Demography – the fear that Jews may become a minority – is the prime concern behind the policies of mainstream forces. State structures, policies and proposed solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are geared as a result to meet the need for a permanent Jewish majority exercising political domination.

How do these features compare with historical South African apartheid?

- The foundation of apartheid was a racial distinction between white and black people (further classified into sub-groups), not an ethno-national distinction. Racial groups were a product of the colonial division of labour, were divided internally on the basis of language, religion and location, and externally linked on these dimensions across the colour-line, creating an intricate picture (Winant 2001). In Israel/Palestine, lines of division usually overlapped. Potential cross-cutting affiliations that existed early on – anti-Zionist orthodox Jews, Arabic-speaking indigenous Jewish communities – were undermined by the simultaneous rise of the Zionist and Arab nationalist movements to a dominant position. This allowed no space for those straddling multiple identities.
In South Africa then, there was a contradiction between the organisation of the state around the single axis of race, and social reality that allowed more diversity in practice and multiple lines of division as well as cooperation. This opened up opportunities for change. The apartheid state endeavoured to eliminate this contradiction by entrenching residential, educational, religious and cultural segregation, seeking to shift its basis of legitimacy from race to culture. But, its capacity was eroded over time and cracks opened up in the structure of domination. In Israel/Palestine the fit between state organisation and social reality is tighter, with a crucial exception: Palestinian citizens are positioned in between Jewish citizens and Palestinian non-citizens. Their role therefore is crucial.

Under South African apartheid the central goal of the state was to ensure that black people performed their role as providers of cheap labour, without pursuing subversive social and political demands. The strategy focused on externalising them: they were physically present at white-owned homes, farms, mines, factories and service industries, but absent, legally and politically, as rights-bearing citizens. They were supposed to commute – daily, monthly or even annually, depending on the distance – between the places where they had jobs but no political rights and the places where they had political rights but no jobs (‘homelands’). This system of migrant labour created tensions between political and economic imperatives. To fulfil the ideology of separation between working and living spaces, it broke down families and the social order, hampered efforts to create a skilled labour force, reduced productivity, and gave rise to crime and social protest. To control people, it created a bloated repressive apparatus that put a huge burden on state resources and capacities. Domestic and industrial employers faced increasing difficulties in meeting their labour needs. From an economic asset (for whites), it became a liability. While some forms of racialised labour remain useful for South African capitalism, the rigid forms of separation practised under apartheid increasingly became counterproductive and were eventually discarded.

The imperative of the Israeli system, in contrast, has been to create employment for actual and potential Jewish immigrants. Arab labour power was used by some groups of employers in certain periods as it was available and convenient, but it never became central to Jewish prosperity in the country. The strategic sectors of the economy – energy, security-related industries, high-tech enterprises – have been largely reserved for
Jews. Following the first Intifada of the late 1980s, Palestinian workers from the occupied territories were increasingly replaced by ‘safe’ foreign labourers. The externalisation of Palestinians, through ethnic cleansing, blockade, and denial of work and residence permits, has not presented serious economic problems for Israel in recent decades.

In summary then, apartheid of a special type in Israel/Palestine is different from the South African system in three major respects:

- At its foundation there are consolidated and relatively impermeable ethno-national identities, with few cross-cutting affiliations across the principal divide in society.
- It is relatively free of economic imperatives that run counter to its overall exclusionary thrust, because it is not dependent on the exploitation of indigenous labour even though it is based on land expansion.
- Its quest is for demographic majority as the basis for military and political domination.

In all these respects it is less prone to integrative solutions along the lines of post-apartheid South Africa. At the same time, it is subject to contradictions of its own, which are crucial to its dynamics and present potential opportunities for political action:

- Its foundational act of ethnic cleansing in 1948 left behind a defeated and dislocated Arab minority group. No longer considered a major threat, this group used its limited but real legal and political incorporation to reorganise and build a foundation for resistance politics, combining parliamentary and protest activities that have challenged Israel’s exclusionary structures from within. It is the only serious opposition in parliament, filling the gap between dissident Jewish activists and Palestinians in the occupied territories. Some of the issues it raises – land, housing, social services – may fit in a new agenda shared with allies within Israeli-Jewish society, while its rights-oriented programme is aligned with the broader Palestinian struggle. Its minority status makes it an unlikely leader of anti-systemic mobilisation but it could play a critical bridging role between groups.
- The Palestinian struggle against occupation and land dispossession in the 1967 territories has suffered from factionalism (especially between nationalist and Islamic forces) as well as the inability to forge alliances with activists inside the Green Line, Jews and Arabs. Internal unity and cooperation across the Line are essential for building an anti-colonial movement. The diplomatic route pursued by the Palestinian Authority and the military route pursued by Hamas have failed. A strategy of popular mass struggle by civil society, communities and political forces is the only way forward, though it is still in its infancy.

- The international scene is beginning to show signs of eroding support for some aspects of the Israeli regime. It is not facing serious external military or political challenges yet but some expressions of weaknesses are evident. Among them, solidarity with the Palestinian struggle plays a role. The rise of civil society and alternative media counteracts, to some extent, the unconditional support given by western governments and media to Israel and its policies. There may be room for cautious optimism that the tide is beginning to turn.

What role do the concepts of settler colonialism and apartheid play in all that? They have contributed to solidarity politics and symbolic mobilisation on issues of land and race (such as Black Lives Matter, the Dakota access pipeline protests in the US and boycott campaigns in South Africa). They may serve to encourage thinking about colonialism and resistance, liberation movements and mass participation, alliances and campaigns. But, the direct impact on the ground has been limited and the potential for action is contradictory due to the built-in tension between the settler-colonial and apartheid paradigms.

The apartheid paradigm focuses on the historical formation of a unified, albeit highly unequal, society, which gives rise to internal conflict over rights and resources. The settler-colonial paradigm retains a core distinction between indigenous people and settlers, focusing on the need to redress historical dispossession. These two are not mutually exclusive, as shown by post-apartheid South Africa, but they move in different directions: on the one hand, seeking to overcome racial barriers imposed under apartheid by building political alliances; on the other hand, mobilising to reverse settler expansion. Labour, social equality and political inclusion are central to the anti-apartheid thrust. Land and indigenous consolidation are central to the anti-colonial thrust. By
definition, reversing apartheid means a challenge to its group categories and boundaries, while reversing colonialism frequently means reinforcing them to enhance resistance.

Paradigms deal with ideal types, of course, rather than messy historical cases. South African apartheid was a product of racial industrialisation superimposed on colonial settlement and indigenous dispossession, whereas race realities in the US are a product of genocide, racial slavery, and cross-border expansion and migration. Race in the United Kingdom is a product of immigration against the background of the rise and demise of empire. The balance between land, labour, legal and cultural concerns is based on the concrete conditions of emergence and evolution of each case.

The challenge with Israel/Palestine is to come up with a new synthesis that builds on the core strengths of each approach but goes beyond them. With an all but dead peace process, Arab states that show ever-decreasing interest in the conflict, international solidarity movements that have little impact on the ground, and a sterile ‘anti-normalisation’ campaign that isolates and incapacitates Palestinian activists even further, what is the alternative?

Combining the two paradigms means a focus on forging internal Palestinian unity on each side of the Green Line as well as across it. The move to consolidate a united indigenous anti-colonial front would work best if it were based on common core demands combined with a recognition of the specific issues and conditions of struggle that face the different segments of the Palestinian people in their own terrains. An anti-apartheid campaign to build social and political alliances across the Jewish-Arab divide would complement this focus in order to overcome the regime’s strategy of entrenching segregation (Hafrada). Its aim would be to pursue struggles together with progressive and socially marginalised Jewish constituencies, based on shared concerns.

Without doubt, getting Israeli Jews involved in a joint struggle with Palestinians (even on relatively ‘apolitical’ issues) is the most difficult part of this approach. The Israeli version of apartheid has been founded on the deployment of Jewish ethno-religious identity as a mechanism of exclusion. Social class-based concerns have been relegated to a secondary position to be pursued only within Jewish boundaries, not across them. There is no ready-made formula available to detach marginalised Jewish communities from their alliance with the nationalist-religious trend dominant in Israeli politics, but recognising the challenge is the first step towards a solution.
NOTE


REFERENCES


