**Seminar 1**

**Situating Palestine through the lens of settler colonialism**

Notes from a seminar given by the Situating Palestine Collective

**Understanding Palestine today**

A typical error made in analysing the current situation in Palestine is its reduction to an ethnic-religious conflict. This definition is ahistorical and fails to account for the genocide that is taking place today. The violence happening now is not an isolated event, but rather a manifestation of Zionist settler-colonial structures. Recognising this allows for comparisons of Israel to cases such as Apartheid South Africa, or French-Algeria, and earlier settler colonial formations such as the United States, therefore breaking through the view of Zionism and Israel as utterly exceptional cases. **Understanding the current situation in Palestine thus requires analyzing Zionism and Israel through the lens of settler colonialism.**

**What is Settler Colonialism?**

Settler colonialism differs from colonialism in two fundamental ways. Firstly, in settler colonialism land is central. Secondly, in order to appropriate that land, **the settlers’ goal is not ‘just’ domination, but the elimination of indigenous peoples**. Importantly, settler colonialism is not an event, but a structure. Once the settler colonialist project reaches its objective of the indigenous peoples’ complete replacement by the settler population, it seeks to create & present itself as a legitimised state. This can take the shape of a ‘democratic’ state with some ethnic diversity; Indigenous minorities may then be tolerated as second- or third-class citizens. Settler colonialism thus seeks to abolish itself.

**The Mushaa’(Common Land)**

**The Mushaa’ as a Social Relation:** the Arabic term for ‘commons’: a prominent system of land tenure in the Levant. The land was held in common by all members of a village or community rather than divided into individual parcels of land,70% of the land by the end of the Ottoman Empire was collectively owned.

**The British mandate from 1917-1948**

Palestine was perceived by the British as a terra nullius: i.e., the collectively owned lands of Indigenous Palestinians were regarded as empty, unused, unproductive land. In order to capitalise on that land, the British state promoted its privatisation. Opening the gates to settlers served this goal. Against this background, Britain promised the creation of a Jewish national home in Palestine in the Balfour Declaration in 1917. Zionist colonisers were thus invited into Palestine and protected by British colonial law. As the Situating Palestine Collective put it: “**The settler colonial core was being nurtured within an imperial colonial shell.**” In turn, the Zionist settlements served the British as an imperialist anchor in the region.

Palestinians were not passive recipients in all of this. Several anticolonial uprisings happened, the biggest being the Arab Revolt of 1936-39. This resistance was being suppressed by British military and Zionist troops.

**The UN Partition Plan**

When the British decided to end their colonisation of Palestine in 1947, the fate of historical Palestine was taken up by the UN-General Assembly through a special committee (UNSCOP), which decided to partition Palestine into two states; one Jewish and one Arab. At this point, **Zionist settlers were controlling about 6% of Palestinian land. The UN partition plan, however, granted them circa 55.5% of Palestine’s fertile land.** This division was based on oversimplified ethnic separations, which demonstrated a clear lack of understanding of the multiethnic Palestinian people. Furthermore, granting land to Jewish people was seen as a form of reparation for the Shoah (Holocaust) in Europe - and the British actively promoted the false equation of Zionism with Judaism. Consequently, the partition plan did not find acceptance amongst Palestinians or neighbouring Arab countries. Nonetheless, the UN went through with it, creating conditions for war.

**Al Nakba & Aftermath**

What followed was a time called Al Nakba (‘The Catastrophe’) by Palestinians. This period is marked by organised attacks and massacres committed by Zionist militias. A massive displacement of Palestinians ensued, accompanied by a massive emplacement of Zionist settlers. **750,000 indigenous Palestinians** were forcefully expelled from their villages, towns, and cities and driven into exile. Additionally, **almost 500 villages** were destroyed, most of them entirely erased from the landscape.

In 1949, an Armistice Agreement was made, which now granted about 77% of Palestinian land to Zionist settlers. The agreement, however, was followed by the continuation of Zionist settler colonialism.

Today, there are over 6 million Palestinian refugees, divided over 58 UNRWA refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Israel has never implemented the UN resolution 194 for Palestinian refugees that stipulates their right to return to their original homes and lands or be compensated for the losses. Until today Israel refuses to grant this ‘right of return‘. As for their villages and cities, Israel actively erases the traces and ruins of Palestinian villages and towns. This reflects the organising principle of settler colonialism: elimination of the Indigenous. Settlers are therefore being normalised as first-class citizens.

**Illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 1967**

**Visualising Palestine:** Since the Oslo Accords (1992-1995), the Palestinian West Bank has been divided into three administrative zones:

Canton A (18%), where Palestinians are allowed to live and self-govern.

Canton B (22%), in which Palestinians live, but where security remains under Israeli military control.

And Canton C (60%) under full Israeli military control, which primarily consists of all natural resources and the Israeli settlements on hilltops that allow the settlers to oversee and control the Palestinian areas. **In contravention of international law, nowadays there are many illegal Israeli settlements and outposts, which are subsidized by the Israeli government and aim to further grab Palestinian land and resources, change the demographic distribution within the West Bank as well as to deeply fragment the social fabric of the Palestinians.** Moreover, Israel enforces large control over Palestinian borders and roads and thereby restricts travel outside of, as well as hinders movement within these areas. This implies that for instance, the West Bank is today shaped by a segregated road system, which prohibits cars with Palestinian license plates from driving on Israeli roads.

**Conclusion**

Palestine is deeply ingrained in the settler colonial project. Following over a hundred years of settler colonialism, currently, there is practically no Palestinian control over roads, water, natural resources, borders; there is no possibility for Palestinian refugees to make use of the right to return. Thus, there is no Palestinian control over land. **By situating Palestine through the lens of settler colonialism it thus becomes clear that the two-state solution is impossible.** Rather, the speaker from the Situating Palestine Collective advocates for one state. One state for all, without a settler-colonial regime. One state, which is not created through the erasure of an entire people.

**Book recommendations**

* *The Hundred Years War on Palestine* by Rashid I. Khadid
* *Settler colonialism and the transformation of anthropology* by Patrick Wolfe
* *Settler colonialism: a theoretical overview* by Lorenzo Veracini

  