



Ethnic cleansing and the formation of settler colonial geographies

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ABSTRACT

Taking into account that ethnic cleansing not only undoes the legal and spatial formations within a given territory but also is a productive force aimed at securing and normalizing a new political order within a contested territory, we examine its impact on settler colonial geographies. We show that the relative completeness or incompleteness of ethnic cleansing helps shape the specific configuration of two intricately tied sites of social management – spatial reproduction and legal governance – within settler colonial regimes. We claim that complete ethnic cleansing produces a ‘refined’ form of settler colonialism resembling the colonial geographies of North America and Australia and is more readily normalized, while incomplete ethnic cleansing produces an ‘intermediate’ form of settler colonialism similar to the colonial regime in Rhodesia before the settlers lost power and is impossible to normalize due to a series of contradictions stemming from the presence of the ‘indigenous other’. To uncover this less acknowledged feature of ethnic cleansing we compare two territories that were colonized by Israel during the 1967 War: the Syrian Golan Heights and the Palestinian West Bank.

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Introduction

Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show* was well-known for its left leaning political satire. Although the program focused on the United States, from time to time Stewart broadened the coverage and examined political events in other countries. Over the years, the policies adopted by the Israeli government had been among his satirical targets. A section dealing with Israel’s 2014 military campaign in Gaza caught our eyes, since in the map suspended behind Stewart Israel’s borders were not drawn according to the internationally recognized 1949 armistice agreements (Fig. 1). The map is accurate in the sense that Israel’s borders do not encompass the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza Strip, but its depiction of the Golan Heights as an integral part of Israel is flawed. The fact that Stewart’s team chose this map is, however, hardly coincidental, since many existing maps have erased the line separating the Golan from Israel.

Reflecting on the difference between the West Bank and the Golan Heights, two areas that Israel occupied in the June 1967 War, Meir Shalev, one of Israel’s most popular authors, remarked that ‘The holy sites of the West Bank represent today the pinnacles of lunacy, evilness and stupidity... The Golan, on the other hand, is the only *normal* territory we have left. It has no holy tombs, sites of religious frenzy or a large downtrodden and rebellious population’ (Shalev, 1994,

emphasis added). Normal for Shalev means uncontested, familiar, or as one Israeli journalist once said, more Israeli than Israel itself (Shalev, 2010). Nachum Barnea, a prominent Israeli journalist, offered an interesting account of why the Golan Heights became ‘normal’. ‘In the beginning there was fear’, he wrote. ‘The Syrian plateau posed a tangible threat to the [Israeli] valley. Then the remaining [Syrian] residents were removed. Their expulsion was necessary. The [Israeli] Labour movement does not occupy anything other than empty land; where the emptiness was not complete, it took care to make it complete...’ (Barnea, 1994). If one juxtaposes these two vignettes alongside the map used in *The Daily Show*, then an important question arises: Did the removal of the Golan’s Syrian population help produce its perceived Israeliness?

Building on existing research into ethnic cleansing, in the following pages we examine how the relative completeness or incompleteness of ethnic cleansing helps shape colonial geographies. We claim that there is a relation between the relative completeness of the ethnic cleansing and the type of settler colonialism that is produced. Relatively complete ethnic cleansing produces a ‘refined’ form of settler colonialism resembling the colonial geographies of North America and Australia and is characterized by the ability to normalize the contested space. In this form of settler colonialism, contradictions and excesses are less obvious since the indigenous population was almost completely cleansed and the landscape was reproduced through comprehensive destruction of indigenous spaces. By contrast, incomplete or less complete ethnic cleansing produces an ‘intermediate’ form of settler colonialism similar to the colonial regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa before the settlers lost power and is characterized by

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Fig. 1. Map of Israel similar to the one that appeared behind Jon Stewart. The West Bank is depicted as a separate entity, while the Golan Heights, which were occupied by Israel during the same war, are presented as an integral part of Israel.

a series of contradictions stemming from the settler's inability to totally prohibit the indigenous population's access to the territory – the primary objective of settler colonialism (Rose, 1991).¹

By ethnic cleansing we do not mean a genocidal campaign, but rather 'a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas' (United Nations, 1994). Accordingly, the violence of ethnic cleansing is directed at emptying a space of certain populations (ethnic or religious groups) and has a spatial dimension that is vital to the definition of the violence. Genocidal violence, by contrast, focuses on the extermination of populations, and its object is the human body, while the spatial dimension exists but is incidental. Interestingly, most of the scholarly literature has emphasized how ethnic cleansing is associated with the collapse of governing apparatuses, and is both a driving force and a product of human created catastrophes, but has dedicated only scant attention to the implicit objective of the cleansing: the effort to secure and normalize a new political order within a contested or colonized territory. Our claim is that the degree of ethnic cleansing is vital for understanding the new political order since the presence or absence of the "indigenous other" (Veracini, 2008) helps determine the spatial and legal configurations produced within the territory where the cleansing took place. This, in turn, has an impact on the territory's normalization, where normalization means the construction of the space in question as ordinary, familiar and, indeed, uncontested in the eyes of the majority of the population whose side is responsible for carrying out the cleansing.

In order to advance this argument, we tap into the existing literature on settler colonialism. We espouse Patrick Wolfe's (1999, 2006) claim that settler colonialism is a structure, and embrace Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen's (2005) position that the structure is not homogeneous and can take on different forms and operate in diverse ways according to the circumstances that produced it (Elkins & Pedersen, 2005). Yet, unlike Elkins and Pedersen who highlight different structural manifestations of settler societies such as the level of settler control and settler privilege, we contend that the relative completeness or incompleteness of the ethnic cleansing plays a vital role in determining the particular makeup of the colonial geography and the legal framework that are introduced in the region. More precisely, the relative completeness or lack thereof of ethnic cleansing configures the actual structure – refined or intermediate – of the colonial geography by shaping 1) the specific way space is reproduced and 2) the legal regime that is instituted within that space. It is important to add, however, that insofar that ethnic cleansing is not a 'one-off occurrence' (Wolfe, 2006, 388), then these settler colonial structures are to a certain extent fluid, changing overtime according to the quantity and proportion of the cleansing within a given period.

In order to uncover this less acknowledged – because profoundly disturbing – feature of ethnic cleansing we compare two territories that were occupied by the same state during the same military campaign (the June 1967 War): the Syrian Golan Heights and the Palestinian West Bank. Out of a population of 128,000 Syrians living in the Golan Heights before the war, only 6500 or five percent remained in the territory after the war (Golan Archive [GA], 1969; Kipnis, 2013, 56–60). In the West Bank, by contrast, out of a population of approximately 850,000 before the war, about 600,000 or seventy percent remained in the region in its aftermath (Ennab, 1994; ICBS, 1967, at Perlmann, 2011). Focusing on the two intricately tied sites of social management – spatial reproduction and legal governance – we argue that the relative completeness or lack thereof of ethnic cleansing not only shapes colonial geographies but also influences the ability to normalize colonial spaces. More specifically, we show how the scope of the ethnic cleansing carried out in the Golan Heights helped produce a refined form of settler colonialism, while the partial ethnic cleansing carried out in the West Bank produced an intermediate form of settler colonialism. The comparison of governing techniques employed by the same state in the two territories that it occupied during the same war enables us to understand the impact of ethnic cleansing on settler colonial geographies and the forms of spatial and social management.

The paper is divided into four main parts. Following an overview of the literature on ethnic cleansing, we briefly outline our methodology. Next, we concisely compare the degree of ethnic cleansing carried out in the Golan Heights and West Bank. In the third and main part, we expose how the relative completeness or incompleteness of ethnic cleansing created two forms of colonial geographies: refined and intermediate. To do so, we compare the movement of settlers to each region, the layout of the settlements and the modes of legal governance in the two regions. By way of conclusion, we examine the relation between the form of the colonial geography and its normalization.

Ethnic cleansing

During the brutal and prolonged civil war in the former Yugoslavia (1992–1995), western commentators translated and popularized the Serbo-Croatian phrase '*etničko ci scenje*', thus rendering the term ethnic cleansing familiar to international audiences (Petrovic, 1994, 343). Notwithstanding the succinct definition provided above and the fact that ethnic cleansing is always achieved by violence, fear and terror, the reasons leading to its

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