

Review

*On Settler Colonialism*  
*Ideology, Violence, Justice*

by Adam Kirsch

New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024 [ISBN 978-1-324-10534-3] pp.139

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**T**his book is about the hatred of history – the hatred of past wrongs. It is also about “a dream of the future in which the past is rectified.” It attempts through an analysis of the ideology of *Settler Colonialism* to imagine what the consequences of reversing history’s record of violence and injustice could be. Nowadays those appalled by what Hegel called “the slaughter-bench of history” often feel driven to repair the past in the interests of what they call ‘social justice’.

Consequently, this book takes as its starting point the Hamas pogrom of October 7<sup>th</sup> and in order to delve deeper into the motives of those who did the killings, moves swiftly

to a detailed and scholarly discussion of the idea of settler colonialism. The classic countries for this purpose are Australia, Canada, and the United States. The existence of all three countries is, in each case, undeniably the product of the destruction of the native peoples found in possession of the land at the time that the settlers' ships were first sighted from the shore.

Adam Kirsch, a poet, literary critic, and scholar of the *Talmud*, takes his readers through seven short chapters in which he examines the growth and influence of the belief that settler colonialism is a phenomenon that must be erased from history. His most important observation is that once a country is said to be a 'Settler Colonial State' it is forever illegitimate. It can never overcome or be rescued from the original sin of its creation.

The difficulty here is that the aspiration to undo the damage done by settler colonialism cannot be fulfilled or even imagined. Twenty-five million Australians cannot be removed in order to restore the original peoples of this vast land to their sole occupancy. Similarly, the three or four hundred million North Americans cannot be thrown out in order to give the land back to the Wapanahki, to the Lakóta, to the Ohkay Owingeh, or to the hundreds of other tribes driven to extinction, or lingering in the margins permitted by the settler state.

History cannot be undone. What can be done is to deny the legitimacy of Australia, Canada, and the United States. Using the ideas of settler-colonialism, the heroic achievements and virtues Australia or America, can be trashed by unending reference to the original sin of their creation. This enables those in the grip of these ideas to denounce everything about their past, without the actual possibility of doing anything about it.

But do not despair, because Algeria and Rhodesia are on hand as exemplary examples of liberation from historic wrongs. However, the differences between these colonies and North America or Australia reveal the absurdity of the project of rolling back history. In both Algeria and Rhodesia, the settlers were a small minority, vastly outnumbered by the

native peoples. What is more, the settlers had ‘home countries’ to which they could flee once the struggle for liberation took hold. This does not apply to the descendants of those emigrants transported, indentured, enslaved, or freely shipped to Australia, or Canada or America in vast numbers over several centuries – these people do not have another ‘home’ to go to, they cannot be removed.

How about Israel then, today’s ‘settler colony’ *par excellence* in the minds of those seeking to roll back history. Adam Kirsch explains the utility of Israel to the settler colonial case:

In the American context . . . settler colonialism functions as an all-purpose explanation for capitalism, sexism, and climate change. Adding the Israel-Palestinian conflict to the mix is powerfully energizing, giving a local address to a struggle that can otherwise feel all too abstract.

Yet this only works if we ignore the real character of colonies. Colonies were founded by imperial powers to extract natural resources, to exploit the native population, and for a settler elite to enjoy a higher standard of living than was typically available at ‘home’. None of these factors apply to Israel:

From the 1880s to the present day, the main driver of large-scale Jewish emigration to Israel has not been economic ambition but political persecution. It is a country built by refugees – from tsarist oppression in the early twentieth century, Nazism in the 1930s, Arab nationalist regimes after 1948, and the former Soviet Union in the 1990s. The state of Israel was recognized by the United Nations in 1948 in large part because hundreds of thousands of Jews were languishing in displaced persons camps in Europe with nowhere to go. And the Holocaust vindicated the central Zionist principle that the

Jewish people need a country where no one can shut the doors against them.

The other reason for not accepting that Israel is a settler colony is that the country's seven million Jews have no other home to go to. They are rather like the Arab Algerians, the Vietnamese, or the black people of Rhodesia-Zimbabwe. Israelis are already at home, and will fight with unending and ruthless commitment to hang on to the only country they have.

In conclusion Adam Kirsch reflects on examples he takes from the *Talmud* on the violence and injustice inherent in attempting to rectify past wrongs.

History cannot be undone in America or Australia; history cannot be undone anywhere at all. He quotes Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *The Buried Giant*, when discussing the consequences of attempting the impossible; attempting to turn back history: "Men will burn their neighbours' houses by night. Hang children from trees at dawn. The rivers will stink of corpses bloated from their days of voyaging."

This is a grim warning which we know is no exaggeration. We only need to think of Ukraine's Holodomor, of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, of Pol Pot, or all the other attempts throughout history to start from Year Zero – to stop the clock – and restart history anew. It has always ended in disaster and barbarism.

History cannot be undone, and Adam Kirsch in this book explains brilliantly why those 'social justice warriors' who want to repair and restore the past can only destroy the future.