

BOOK REVIEWS

McNAMEE, LACHLAN. *Settling for Less. Why States Colonize and Why They Stop*. Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 2023. xi, 240 pp. Ill. Maps. \$35.00; £30.00. (E-book: \$24.50; £21.00.)

The war in Israel–Palestine has focused attention on the ways in which colonization affects the world today: the long history of settlement of European Jews in Israel, the forced exodus of Palestinians from land where their families had lived, and the continued planting of Israeli colonies in the West Bank. Taken together, the actions of the Israeli state and Israeli settlers represent, in the eyes of some scholars, an instance of “settler colonialism”, comparable to the seizure of lands from indigenous populations in North America, Australia, Southern Africa, and elsewhere. One of the virtues of Lachlan McNamee’s book is that it raises theoretical and empirical questions about this concept. He separates the interests and modes of action of settlers and the state, arguing that they were often at odds. He is equally critical of tendencies in scholarly literature to look at forced displacement of one people by another as a uniquely “Western” phenomenon, and he cites examples of such displacement by states that had recently liberated themselves from European colonial rule.

McNamee makes his case with a combination of detailed case studies and more general historical and theoretical arguments. The case studies are particularly impressive, not least for the use of census, cartographic, and other quantitative data to reveal patterns of settlement that actually occurred, not just what policymakers sought or what observers thought was happening. States were likely to favor displacement of indigenous populations and settlement of new ones when they had security concerns on their edges, especially about possibly dissident populations on both sides of a border and, in some cases, where high-value natural resources in a vulnerable region were at stake. States exercised “imperfect control” over settlement patterns (p. 30). Settlers often did not go where states wanted them to, dragged states into dangerous confrontations with indigenous populations, and stayed in places where they no longer served state purposes. At the same time, settlers could not control states, which might or might not leave them in the lurch.

McNamee’s telling first case study is of a project of the state of Indonesia. After proudly fighting for its independence from Dutch colonial rule, it wrested control of West Papua (New Guinea) from the Dutch, proceeded to put down West Papuans who sought their own state, and, between 1984 and 1999, settled 300,000 farmers from Indonesia’s core islands in that space. The government hoped to secure the territory and extract newly discovered resources from it. McNamee contrasts this instance of colonizing by an apparently anti-colonial state with Australia’s actions on the adjacent portion of New Guinea, where, after Australian citizens showed little interest in settlement, it devolved power to indigenous

political elites, many of whom would have preferred their territory to acquire the status of a province of Australia – decolonizing to keep Australia “white”, one might say. In the Northern Territories of Australia, government settlement projects, intended to forestall Japanese moves into vacant territory, failed to interest potential settlers and the projects fizzled. Taken together, these instances highlight strategic considerations in state policies rather than a nexus of European power–settler colonialism versus nationalism–defense of indigenous rights.

According to McNamee, the Sino–Soviet split, and hence the need to protect a lengthy border – not racial or religious animus or land hunger – was the root cause of China’s efforts, starting at the end of the 1950s, to settle Han Chinese in the western province of Xinjiang at the expense of the region’s largely Muslim population. Mining possibilities added to the interest in Han settlement in parts of Xinjiang. But once China’s economy had taken off, by the 1980s, Han Chinese wanted to move to urban and industrial areas, not remote Xinjiang, and there has been little demographic shift ever since (p. 133). The Chinese government did not get its way.

In a broad survey of the situation today and of the recent past, McNamee claims that Israel is virtually the only “modern” state that practices wholesale displacement and settlement. Perpetrators like the states of Myanmar or Sri Lanka and victims like Rohingya, Tamils, Palestinians, or Kurds get little attention because these are “brown-on-brown” phenomena (p. 150). Colonizers, in McNamee’s sense of the term, are now national states, not colonial empires, and authoritarian states are only slightly more likely to engage in such practices than democratic ones. His most far-reaching conclusion is that “as states modernize, they lose the power to colonize” (p. 151).

Missing almost entirely from the analysis – despite its all-encompassing conclusion – is the Soviet Union, one of the most important perpetrators of displacement of people defined by “ethnic” criteria and the forced resettlement of others. This in a state thoroughly committed to a modernizing project, however problematic that project turned out to be. Missing, too, are paradigmatic instances of struggles over decolonizing territories in which settlers were a crucial part, such as Algeria or Kenya, and, in a different way, South Africa. Although his case studies benefit from attention to process – how ruling elites perceived a situation and acted accordingly, and how their actions had consequences – he misses an opportunity to use similar approaches to explain *how* states came to abandon their support of settlers and how, on a global scale, colonization in most senses of the term came to lose legitimacy. Lacking the kind of path-dependent analysis evident in other parts of the book, his conclusions leave open the question of whether he has fallen into the old trap of conflating correlation with causation.

McNamee makes it harder for himself to understand the place of settler colonization in its historical context by the way he defines the concept. Although he uses “colonialism” and “colonization” interchangeably (p. 5), he effectively subverts the “ism”, which implies an ideological coherence to colonizing that goes against his argument. More serious is the narrowness of his conception of “colonization”. He uses it exclusively to mean “state building involving the displacement of indigenous peoples by settlers” (p. 4). This definition clearly captures one meaning

that the word has had, going back to the Roman Empire when it signified the establishment of offshoots of Rome across a vast region, protected by imperial military power. But, in ordinary English and most other European languages, the word also means the establishment of control of new territory by states – something McNamee wants to call “imperialism” (p. 5). The two may be distinguished conceptually, but they are historically intertwined. Empires have repertoires of rule, including the sponsoring of settlement, the acquisition, administration, and exploitation of territory with minimal settlement, protectorates, tribute collection, and other forms of exercising power over peoples and territories. Colonial empires, like those of Britain and France, practiced all or most of these forms, often at the same time. One finds, for example, McNamee’s imperialism in British Ghana, his colonialism in Rhodesia, and both his imperialism and his colonialism in different parts of Kenya – a case that gets no mention in this book. Algeria’s history did not begin as a settlement project, but it soon became that, with fateful consequences. French settlers also went to Morocco, but it was a protectorate rather than a colony, and, while its history overlapped that of Algeria in important respects, the *dénouements* of the two instances of colonization were quite different. Imperial powers could shift their emphasis among different parts of their repertoires. When it came to deciding when and how to devolve parts or all of colonial empires, the context of decision-making was not the binary of individual colony and metropole but the matrix of power relations across the imperial field. Imperial (or colonial) power was not just a question of the relationships of governments, settlers, and indigenous populations, but of rival empires with each other. McNamee’s colonialism and his imperialism both fostered thinking about certain categories of people as “deportable” or “expendable”. These cultural complexes condition who, in the eyes of leaders and often the people they represent, can be subject to exclusion and violence, in postcolonial as well as colonial situations, not least in the case of Israel–Palestine (or Ukraine) today. Similar issues apply outside of European empires. McNamee may be right to consider that China’s attempt to put Han settlers in Xinjiang was a failure, but the story looks different when one considers the entire repertoire of power exercised by the Chinese government over this region. China’s repertoire mixed settlement with various forms of repressive power exercised against a population defined as “other”. It still does.

This misconception of the relationship between colonization as settlement and other forms of imperial power is one problem with his all-embracing generalization about the causal relationship of ending colonies and “modernization”. This term means many things, but, in McNamee’s usage, it boils down to urbanization (p. 22) and, implicitly, industrialization and capitalism. He thinks he can explain why the increasing attractiveness of urban activities made seizing or maintaining control of land less attractive to settlers. There is something to this proposition, but the trouble is that urbanization and industrialization have, in the case of Europe and its offshoots, been going on since the eighteenth century, overlapping with both colonization and decolonization. Invoking it does not explain the timing of decolonization, and it was both colonies of settlement and colonies of administration and exploitation that were given up together and in a remarkably

short span of time between 1945 and 1965. Might the when and the how have had something to do with inter-empire power dynamics, not least World War II?

Although McNamee has not provided the theoretical or empirical justification for his subtitle (“Why States Colonize and Why They Stop”), he has nonetheless made important contributions to the study of colonization. He has demonstrated the conceptual flaws of the construct “settler colonialism”, and he has shown how much is to be gained by examining the tension between “settler” and “state”. He builds on this distinction to bring needed precision to interpreting multiple instances of imposed displacement and settlement. Much of his text could be a model for an examination of the important and complex relationship between decolonization and capitalism that goes beyond the unconvincing generalization that diminishes this otherwise insightful book.

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The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists around the World. Ed. by Francisca de Haan. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2023. xxiv, 701 pp. Ill. € 217.99. (E-book: € 160.49.)

My initial feelings when I opened this book were ones of impatience and curiosity – the book promised the long-awaited possibility of bringing together separate and controversial facts, notes, and tacit knowledge concerning the lives and deeds of women activists, the names of many of whom were familiar to me through my research on the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF).¹ Despite communist and leftist women being prominent participants in many international events during the twentieth century, the information on them on Wikipedia or the internet is scarce and almost no scholarly works have been published on these activists. The atmosphere of criticism of communist and Soviet politics cannot alone explain the lack of information regarding these prominent female historical actors: the availability of information and publications on male communists, including Stalin, Mao, and Trotsky, indicate an important gender disbalance concerning the representation of communists in history. So, I had long been waiting for such a book. My expectations were well rewarded by this volume, edited by Francisca de Haan.

The book appears at a time when the whole field of “post-communist” studies once again finds itself at the centre of the deepest crisis (after the end of the communist/state socialist system) due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the context of this devastating war, learning from the past, understanding the reasons why women

¹Yulia Gradszkova, *The Women’s International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War: Defending the Rights of Women of the “Whole World”?* (London and New York, 2021).