

## Settler Colonialism and Beyond

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Résumé de l'article

*L'approche colonialiste de peuplement a beaucoup à offrir aux historiens. Cependant, lorsque nous considérons le long passé de 500 ans de l'invasion de l'Amérique du Nord autochtone, nous faisons face à plusieurs sortes de colonialisme ; la variété du colonialisme se distingue comme une force dominante à certaines périodes et dans certaines régions, mais elle s'efface pour devenir insignifiante à d'autres. Deux autres versions du colonialisme abordées dans cet article, la « pénétration impériale/commerciale » et « l'extractivisme », semblent particulièrement pertinentes pour l'histoire de la moitié nord du continent. Parallèlement au colonialisme de peuplement, ces deux modes de colonialisme ont fait leur apparition selon des calendriers très différents dans les diverses régions du Canada. L'extractivisme, affirme-t-on ici, est devenu la forme prédominante d'intrusion dans les espaces autochtones au cours des dernières décennies.*

# Settler Colonialism and Beyond

ALLAN GREER\*

## *Abstract*

*The settler colonial approach has much to offer historians. However, when we consider the extended, 500-year history of the invasion of Indigenous North America, we encounter several sorts of colonialism; the settler variety stands out as a dominant force in some periods and regions, but it fades to insignificance in others. Two other versions of colonialism discussed in this article, “Imperial/ Commercial Penetration” and “Extractivism,” seem particularly relevant to the history of the northern half of the continent. Along with Settler Colonialism, these two modes of colonialism made their appearance according to quite different timetables in the various regions of Canada. Extractivism, it is argued here, has become the predominant form of intrusion into Indigenous spaces in recent decades.*

## *Résumé*

*L'approche colonialiste de peuplement a beaucoup à offrir aux historiens. Cependant, lorsque nous considérons le long passé de 500 ans de l'invasion de l'Amérique du Nord autochtone, nous faisons face à plusieurs sortes de colonialisme ; la variété du colonialisme se distingue comme une force dominante à certaines périodes et dans certaines régions, mais elle s'efface pour devenir insignifiante à d'autres. Deux autres versions du colonialisme abordées dans cet article, la « pénétration impériale/commerciale » et « l'extractivisme », semblent particulièrement pertinentes pour l'histoire de la moitié nord du continent. Parallèlement au colonialisme de peuplement, ces deux modes de colonialisme ont fait leur apparition selon des calendriers très différents dans les diverses régions du Canada. L'extractivisme, affirme-t-on ici, est devenu la forme prédominante d'intrusion dans les espaces autochtones au cours des dernières décennies.*

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Cet article est basé sur un discours liminaire prononcé lors de la réunion annuelle de la Société historique du Canada et parrainé par le Musée canadien de l'histoire. Je remercie Kate Desbarats pour ses commentaires et suggestions.

Suddenly, we see the term “settler colonial/ism” everywhere: it came to history a little later than some other disciplines, but it is now definitely part of the conversation.<sup>1</sup> This may be the right time, then, to pause and reflect on what exactly we mean by this phrase, what analytical work it performs, and what role settler-colonial theory may have to play in historical thinking. In what follows, the focus will be mostly, but not exclusively, on Canada. (It’s important to note that, by “Canada,” I mean, in the first instance, a space coinciding roughly with the northern half of the North American continent; the modern territorial state that currently claims sovereignty over that territory is a different object). I’m going to argue that settler colonial theory does indeed have much to offer historians. However, when we consider the extended, 500-year history of the invasion of Indigenous North America, we encounter several sorts of colonialism; the settler variety stands out as a dominant force in some periods and regions, but it fades to insignificance in others.

The phrases “settler colonialism” and “settler colonial theory” emerged in Australia and in critical conversation with a postcolonial theory thought to be exclusively interested in what were sometimes called “colonies of exploitation,” such as the European possessions in tropical Africa and South and Southeast Asia, places where a small number of imperialists dominated large native populations, exploiting the labour of the latter. The late Patrick Wolfe, still the most important theorist of settler colonialism, deployed that term to designate a variety of colonialism that, by contrast, targeted land rather than Indigenous labour. Under this regime, Europeans came in larger numbers and they came to stay; they wanted to replace Natives and make the country entirely their own. Influenced by the materialism of Marxism as well as by postcolonial theory, Wolfe saw settler colonialism as a *logic*, and not simply an ideology or a set of ideas. “Although predicated on land rather than on human bodies,” he writes, “settler colonialism is premised on a cultural logic of elimination that insistently seeks the removal of indigenous humans from the land in question.”<sup>2</sup> “Elimination,” he explained, could involve outright massacre, as well as forced removal and cultural assimilation; it was fuelled and sustained by a panoply of laws and institutions, as well as pervasive racism and a settler historical consciousness that tended to deny dispossession and naturalize settler occupation.<sup>3</sup>

Settler colonial theory is not without its critics, even among those who support its basic political thrust. Some worry that its reli-

ance on a binary opposition of “settler” and “Indigenous” categories leaves little room for the fluid and hybrid identities characteristic of colonial societies.<sup>4</sup> Others have viewed it as a totalizing system that tends to encompass everything, leaving little room for outside forces that might threaten or destabilize it.<sup>5</sup> Andrew Woolford and Jeff Benvenuto warn that, “in common use the term is in danger of becoming a reductive shorthand.” They note further: “For all its heuristic advantages, the settler colonial analytic can flatten our understanding of colonization in a large and diverse space such as Canada when it is facilely embraced.”<sup>6</sup> As historians, we are particularly sensitive to the hazards of temporal flattening — not to mention spatial flattening — when settler colonialism is casually invoked in ways that suggest a transhistorical, always-already quality, as though the settler-colonial condition had no discernible beginning and as if it could never end.

Let me assure you that I am not here to trash or dismiss settler-colonial theory. I personally think it has a great deal to offer anyone trying to understand the present and the past of a country such as Canada. One of the great attractions of this approach is its refusal to separate the historical and the contemporaneous. Settler colonialism, Patrick Wolfe insists, is “a structure, not an event.”<sup>7</sup> Even if it has roots stretching back to earlier times, Indigenous dispossession continues to be the organizing principle of a settler-colonial society, and to treat it as something over and done with is to engage in the kind of denialism favoured by politicians and ideologues. As historians who surely do not want to perpetuate colonialist ideologies, we need to take on board the critique of settler-national historiography sketched out by Wolfe and developed more fully by others such as Lorenzo Veracini.<sup>8</sup> Those of us, in particular, who work on the pre-national period need to get over our tendency to naturalize the intrusions of colonizers and to fetishize “founding” moments.<sup>9</sup> However, that doesn’t mean we need to find settler colonialism everywhere and all the time.

My objective is to try to historicize settler colonialism, viewing it in a long-term perspective to see where and when the logic of elimination and replacement applies and where it doesn’t.<sup>10</sup> If by “colonialism,” we mean the imposition of power from abroad over peoples and spaces, then it’s clear that we are dealing with a phenomenon that comes in many forms.<sup>11</sup> Patrick Wolfe focuses on the colony of settlement/colony of exploitation dyad, exemplified by Australia and British raj India, but there are many other varieties of colonialism, two of which seem particularly relevant to the history of the north-

ern half of the North American continent. I'm going to label them "Imperial/Commercial Penetration" and "Extractivism." Along with Settler Colonialism, these modes of colonialism made their appearance according to quite different timetables in the various regions of Canada; moreover, as new colonialisms arose, the older ones and their effects lingered on. What I'm proposing here is definitely not a succession of self-contained stages each of which begins and ends and makes way for the next phase, but rather coexisting and overlapping versions of colonialism, that came to the fore at different times, and that never entirely disappeared.

### Imperial/Commercial Penetration

It is easy to misunderstand the meaning of "imperial penetration" if one's point of reference is Australia, where the establishment of settler colonies and the expansion of empire were more or less simultaneous and pretty much synonymous. But in this part of the world, and especially in the early modern centuries, empire's reach extended far beyond the little colonies of settlement and it had effects that were important and yet quite distinct from those of settler colonialism. In other words, imperialism and colonization are not the same thing, though obviously they are connected; moreover, for many centuries, the former was a far more significant force than the latter.

Europeans invaded the northern part of North America as early as the sixteenth century, extending the empires of France and England through processes of colonialism that would continue for hundreds of years. There were settlements, initially on the coast of Newfoundland, the Bay of Fundy, and the St Lawrence River, and for two hundred years they hardly functioned as instruments of elimination and replacement except in quite limited, localized ways. Instead of declining or disappearing, the Indigenous population of the St Lawrence Valley increased in tandem with the French settler population. We might better view these settlements, along with trading posts on the shores of Hudson Bay, as base camps for a much broader process of Imperial/Commercial penetration. Commercial exchange, mostly under the conventional heading of "the fur trade," was another major component of the invasion, but it too should be seen as an aspect of something larger, which is to say the expanding influence of European imperialism. Empire is the comprehensive term that I use to encompass limited settlement along with trade, religious missions,

and military alliance systems. I want to stress that all this was anything but harmless.

Two misleading views of the early modern period have become widespread in public discussion of Canada's history of colonialism. One is the always-already projection of settler colonialism into the distant past; the notion is that, from the moment Jacques Cartier planted his cross on the shores of Gaspé, or when Charles II signed the charter of the Hudson's Bay Company, Indigenous dispossession was a legal fact, waiting only to be consummated in practice.<sup>12</sup> The other line of thought recognizes the existence of imperial/commercial penetration but tends to sanitize its history, treating it as a benign story of "Contact and Co-operation," to borrow the words of the 1996 *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*.<sup>13</sup> The popular success of a work such as David Hackett Fischer's *Champlain's Dream* is largely attributable to the way it treats the founding of New France as an exercise in instituting tolerance, cultural diversity and mutual respect — as if the French were not in someone else's country, doing their best to take over!<sup>14</sup> These two views of early colonization may look contradictory, but they share the assumption that colonization by settlers is the *only* external threat First Nations have ever had to face.

What is meant by "empire" anyway? People sometimes imagine, thinking perhaps of the British Empire at its late nineteenth century zenith, a map of the world with great red patches suggestive of clearly demarcated territories, uncontested European sovereignty, and a well-defined chain of command reaching out from a single metropolitan centre to the furthest reaches. But the new imperial history has been challenging that view of empires in general, and particularly in relation to the early modern period when governments did not exercise fully territorialized sovereignty, even within Europe, much less overseas. Empires in this part of the world took the form of nodes and networks, projecting power unevenly and uncertainly over great distances, expanding opportunistically and through the initiative of Europeans or Creoles on the spot, who might be only notionally under the control of metropolitan authorities.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes, as in Latin America, empires expanded through decisive military conquests, but more commonly they grew through unplanned processes of infiltration. Adventurers, missionaries, and traders, as well as horses, cattle, and viruses, were their agents, forging connections with some Indigenous nations, while helping to weaken or destroy others. The resulting violence and destabilization favoured the rise of Indigenous military

empires, such as those of the Commanche, the Dakota, and the Haudenosaunee, but these same conditions also presented opportunities for European imperialism to insert itself into the mix.<sup>16</sup> The tentacles of empire that reached into the continental interior represented degrees of influence rather than full territorial sovereignty. European empires coexisted with Indigenous political independence, but they often had the effect of drawing Indigenous nations into costly imperial wars.

All this has to be understood at the level of what empires and imperial agents *did*, rather than what their titular heads may have *said*. If you look only at the pronouncements of kings and the maps of empire, you might form the impression that France and England actually occupied and controlled vast stretches of the continent, rather than tiny enclaves in an Indigenous continent. And if you read early colonial charters out of context and without paying attention to the conventional idioms of early modern power, then you might think the French and English monarchies envisaged a full and complete takeover of North America, one that left no room for Indigenous peoples and Indigenous lands. Take, for example, the edict by which Louis XIII established the Compagnie de la Nouvelle-France in 1627 and conferred on that corporation all of North America from Florida to the Arctic circle, “en toute propriété, justice et seigneurie.” The 1670 charter of the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) similarly granted, not only a trade monopoly over the bay and its watershed, but also full property rights and jurisdiction: “to have, hold, possess and enjoy the said Territory.”<sup>17</sup> The wording of these documents is in line with dozens of French and English colonial charters of the seventeenth century. Phrased in the haughty language of monarchy and based on only the vaguest sense of North American geography, their spatial expansiveness is meant mainly to ward off rival imperial claimants.<sup>18</sup> The charters confer property rights of a particular kind, characteristic of the period: essentially these are feudal lordships meant to establish legal jurisdiction. They do not imply the sort of exclusive control over land that would nullify existing Indigenous property. Property rights at this time took the form of layered claims to territory and resources; they had none of the absolutist quality that they would acquire in modern times when they would be used to push Natives from the land.<sup>19</sup>

And yet, there is still a tendency among historians to project into this early period a settler-colonial ambition to clear the land for the benefit of eventual settlers. Scholars speak freely of the “Doctrine of



Discovery” and the notion of “*terra nullius*” as if these were guiding principles of early modern empires, as if they asserted ownership claims rather than a vague *imperium*, and as if they actually made Indigenous peoples mere occupants of their own lands.<sup>20</sup> But for the most part, such notions are actually inventions of the *nineteenth* century, devised to justify modern settler colonialism. In the United States, the key figure was Chief Justice John Marshall who, in the 1820s and 1830s, issued judgements and opinions that distorted two centuries of colonial history in order to claim that the Americans had inherited from Britain, not only sovereignty over the unconquered region between the Appalachians and the Mississippi, but also full property in its lands. Around the same time, the HBC enacted a similarly creative and self-serving rereading of history to bolster its claims to property rights over Rupert’s Land.<sup>21</sup>

Neither the HBC nor the Company of New France had any interest in eliminating the Indigenous presence. On the contrary, given their shared dependence on the fur economy, they needed to cultivate a working relationship with Native suppliers who continued to control their own lands. Far from trying to expel Natives, both companies made efforts to attract Indigenous people to their posts and (in the New France case) their settlements. Both basically recognized Indigenous dominion over the land and tried to prevent employees and settlers from infringing on Native property. Ten years after its charter supposedly conferred full property rights, the HBC was instructing Governor John Nixon not to occupy land without purchasing it from Natives and not to pursue trade on their rivers without permission.<sup>22</sup> Louis XIV’s instructions to the governor of New France in 1665 state simply that, “the lands which they [Indigenous people] inhabit are not to be usurped on the pretext that these are better or more convenient for the French.”<sup>23</sup> Which is not to say that dispossession never occurred in the St Lawrence settlements, only that it cannot be seen as the fulfillment of any eliminationist imperial doctrine.

I’ve been trying to establish that imperial/commercial penetration was the dominant face of the European invasion prior to the nineteenth century, but lest you think I’m trying to exonerate the French and British empires, I’ll move quickly to my second point, which is that this imperial expansion was anything but benign. Feel-good versions of the history of the fur trade tend to emphasize the undeniable benefits of imported goods and technologies to many Indigenous hunters, downplaying the destructive turmoil that often



ensued when epidemics spread and the weapons of war were unevenly distributed. Often the trade is depicted in neoliberal terms as a series of voluntary transactions that must, by definition, have been advantageous to both sides. And indeed, research on the fur trade of eastern Canada, the Hudson Bay watershed, and the Pacific coast has demonstrated that it could enrich and empower some individuals and groups. We know, furthermore, that far from being suckers willing to give away rich pelts for worthless trinkets, Indigenous trappers and traders generally drove a hard bargain and typically dictated the terms and rituals of commerce.<sup>24</sup> That said, just because some gained advantages in the immediate term does not mean that the broader effects of commerce were beneficial, nor does it mean that European traders abstained from violence, nor does it mean that trade was not a vehicle for the expansion of empire.<sup>25</sup>

For Europeans of the early modern era, overseas trade was rarely a private, strictly “economic” matter, divorced from issues of power and domination. In the waters off South and Southeast Asia, the Portuguese and Dutch seaborne empires depended on heavily-armed vessels to blast their way into a position of dominance over long-distance trade.<sup>26</sup> Around the same time, French and English empires took shape in North America following a similar pattern of combining the exchange of valuable goods with the assertion of power. Recent scholarship shows that early modern trading corporations, such as the Dutch and English East India Companies, as well as the HBC and the Company of New France, were not simple “business” organizations, but rather carriers of sovereignty and agencies of the imperial state.<sup>27</sup>

These organizations may not have intended to propagate death and mayhem in North America, but that was indeed an effect of their presence and of the commercial expansion they sponsored. Historians of the American southeast and southwest have highlighted the emergence of a “shatter-zone” of deadly epidemics and equally deadly warfare radiating out from the colonies of New Mexico and South Carolina in the late seventeenth–early eighteenth century.<sup>28</sup> The uneven demographic effects of disease and the unequal distribution of new weapons, especially firearms, tended to destabilize regional balances of power and foster successive cycles of violence. Something similar took place around the same time in the Great Lakes hinterland of New France. Even if the French did not deliberately foment death and bloodshed, and even if many of the diseases and much of the weaponry originated in the Dutch and English colonies, it was they who

entered the disturbed territories as traders, missionaries, and military personnel, seizing the opportunity to extend their imperial influence into what had become a vulnerable region. There are parallels in the violently disruptive episodes that swept across the northern plains in the eighteenth century as armaments supplied by the HBC and the Northwest Company fuelled bloody conflict among Crees, Blackfoot, Shoshones, Mandan, and others.<sup>29</sup>

Without necessarily understanding the destabilizing forces that flowed out from the European presence in small coastal enclaves, empire-builders improvised ways to take advantage of the disturbed situation to extend imperial claims far into the interior. Through the Great Lakes in the 1660s, down the Mississippi in the 1670s and 1680s, into the Red and Saskatchewan Rivers by the 1740s, the French parlayed their ability to supply European goods and their willingness to act as dispute arbitrators into a shaky imperial network that provided them with extensive influence and powerful allies in their wars against the English. Their continental empire grew with only minimal traces of conquest and dispossession, nor did it substantially interfere with Indigenous political independence, nor did it require more than a tiny European presence. Without following a settler-colonial “logic of elimination,” the extended imperial network called “New France” was nevertheless responsible for considerable carnage and human suffering. It thrived in a context of violence and instability and as it expanded its reach, it had the effect of spreading destruction further across the continent. The HBC, in spite of leaning more to the commercial end of the imperial/commercial spectrum, also tended to carry turmoil to more and more distant reaches of what it was pleased to call Rupert’s Land.

It starts with the devastation and destabilization that accompanied trade and contact and it culminates in the establishment of a very tenuous empire of trade, alliance, and influence. Imperial/commercial penetration had much more far-reaching effects on Indigenous North America, out of proportion with the displacement occasioned by the very small European settlements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And even as settler colonialism rose to the fore in more recent periods, imperial/commercial modes of engagement continued, especially in the North. As an example, we might cite the construction of the Alaska Highway, an extension of imperial presence into the southern Yukon, with the accompanying disease and dislocation.<sup>30</sup> Cold-war radar stations might also be seen as outposts of empire in

Indigenous territories, while Inuit and Dene members of the Northern Rangers operate as irregular troops guarding Canadian sovereignty in ways reminiscent of the role of Indigenous allies of New France.

### Settler Colonialism

Of course, we can detect traces of the settler-colonial process from the earliest establishment of European colonies, even when imperial/commercial penetration was having a far greater and more widespread impact. Newfoundland fishers blocked Beothuk access to vital coastal resources and early French settlers likewise tried to exclude Innu from valuable eel fisheries at Sillery, near Québec.<sup>31</sup> However, as long as the number of colonists remained small in relation to the territories involved, spatial displacement would not be the salient characteristic of early colonialism. It is really only in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, with the movement of Loyalists to the Maritimes and Upper Canada and with the burgeoning growth of French-Canadian population and the consequent spread of settlement in Lower Canada, that settler colonization emerged as an important independent force. Large-scale immigration from Britain accelerated the process in the first half of the nineteenth century, filling in much of New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. Along with Late Loyalist migration from the United States, it also contributed to the colonization of wide tracts of Upper Canada and the Eastern Townships. Algonquin, Wolastoqiyik, Mi'kmaq, Anishinaabe, and Abenaki territories were severely affected. This all happened after the Royal Proclamation of 1763 had laid down procedures for nullifying Indigenous title to the land through treaties of cession, though its provisions were taken to apply only in areas west of the Ottawa River. No matter: across the Maritimes and Lower Canada, as well as in Upper Canada, settler colonialism drove deep into Indigenous homelands, with or without treaty formalities. At the same time, colonial states, a site where settler forces were challenging imperial control, were changing their attitudes towards Indigenous survivors within their reach: considerations of imperial defense had previously dictated a certain respect for valued military allies, but increasingly policies defined the "Indian problem" as a matter requiring humanitarian protection and cultural assimilation.<sup>32</sup>

Important though these settler-colonial developments were in the period running from the time of the American Revolution to the middle of the nineteenth century, we need to recall that they only

affected a comparatively small fraction of the space we're calling "Canada" and of its total Indigenous population. A glance at the *Historical Atlas of Canada* confirms that much larger areas remained firmly under Indigenous control, though feeling the effects of an imperial/commercial expansion that was still advancing into the North and the West.<sup>33</sup> This was the heyday of the Northwest Company and the Hudson's Bay Company, with their ramifying trade networks reaching to the Pacific and the Arctic Oceans; it coincided also with the cycle of British Arctic exploration exemplified by the Franklin expedition.<sup>34</sup>

It was during the Confederation era, broadly defined, that settler colonialism really reached a continental scale, following an earlier expansion in the United States. United in a federation under the umbrella of the British Empire, the four eastern provinces moved rapidly to acquire the HBC's vast territorial claims in the West (1869); shortly thereafter, they gained the adhesion of a British Columbia where settler mining, ranching, and lumbering were moving rapidly into First Nations lands on the coast and in the interior.<sup>35</sup> A trans-continental railroad, a subsequent wheat boom, and another surge in immigration ensured that, within a few decades, the prairies would fill up with land-hungry settlers. These developments, constitutive of Canada as a large territorial state, occurred within some of the most heavily populated Indigenous regions: the northern plains, where the adoption of equestrian bison hunting had fostered rapid demographic growth over the previous century, and the Pacific Coast and Fraser Valley, long a centre of rich, populous societies. The (re)settlement of the West therefore necessitated extensive dispossession to make room for the newcomers and their plough-based agriculture.

National myths about the "peaceable kingdom" to the contrary, that displacement did not occur through natural and inevitable processes; First Nations did not voluntarily surrender their territories and simply fade away. Displacement was the work of powerful new mechanisms of elimination and replacement that were central to the emergence of Canada as a modern territorial state. The violence of war was one important aspect of that process: wars fought on Canadian soil — the so-called "Riel Rebellions" — and wars fought on the American plains both played a role. Canadian historiography likes to contrast the ferocious history of the so-called "Indian Wars" in the American West with Canada's less bloody record of military colonization, glossing over the vital role played by the US cavalry in inflicting defeats on, and generally softening up, the powerful nations of the

northern plains. Untold incidents of informal, non-state violence were also part of the story of dispossession.

Equally significant was the violence of institutions that were developing rapidly through the second half of the nineteenth century. The famous “numbered treaties” of the 1870s were closely connected to the emergence of a quasi-carceral reserve system supervised by a staff of Indian agents backed by an armed Mounted Police force to enforce compliance.<sup>36</sup> Various programs of cultural assimilation that culminated in the notorious Residential Schools system are all characteristic of the Confederation era. There had indeed been treaties, reserves, and missionary-led assimilation projects in earlier times, but these were rather spotty and comparatively ineffectual before the emergence of the modern state, a much more powerful entity capable of systematic programs conducted on a far broader scale. In the early nineteenth century, there were Indigenous territories of various sorts, including Native-owned seigneuries such as Kahnawake in Lower Canada, but the second half of the century saw the creation of a reserve *system* that attempted to subject Indigenous communities to a high degree of administrative control and that worked to establish uniformity across Canada.<sup>37</sup> These novel developments in eliminating the Indigenous presence to make way for settlers need to be seen not simply as things the government of Canada *did*, but as functions constitutive of what Canada *was* (and is).

We are speaking now of Canada the territorial state, rather than “Canada” as a simple geographic space. Formed in the period extending from the 1850s to the 1880s, the Canadian state can be seen in the current context as a settler-colonial machine.<sup>38</sup> As part of their program of decentralizing the empire and abandoning their lingering responsibility for Natives, the British turned over “Indian Affairs” to the colonies in 1860 and then, seven years later, enacted the British North America Act containing a crucial clause awarding control over “Indians and lands reserved for Indians” to the new Dominion of Canada.<sup>39</sup> The close linkage of “Indians” and “lands” signalled the new, and explicitly settler-colonial orientation of state practices regarding Indigenous affairs. Whereas discourses, institutions, and practices of the imperial-commercial age addressed Indigenous peoples mainly in the contexts of trade, diplomacy, and military alliances, the new Canadian state would be concerned above all with land. That is very much the focus of the Indian Act of 1876 and its pre-Confederation predecessors, such as the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857.<sup>40</sup> Defin-

ing reserves as a space of exception outside the prevailing property regime, these acts implicitly construct all other lands as open to settlers and investors. Furthermore, though the Indian Act was supposed to guarantee the integrity of reserve territories, the bulk of its clauses are dedicated to various procedures for undermining Indigenous control: through timber leases, mining concessions, and the like, as well as through an “enfranchisement” program by which “qualified” Indians would obtain citizenship, taking a portion of reserve lands into the settler sphere. Unanimously rejected by Indigenous people the failed enfranchisement program nevertheless reveals the policy thrust behind the legislation: simultaneously establishing and undermining Native spaces. A multi-faceted assault on Indigenous lands, Indigenous cultures, and Indigenous political independence was arguably the central feature in the making of Canada as a self-governing polity within the British Empire.

For anyone interested in the mid-nineteenth century developments that established Canada as a territorial state — and in the expanding and deepening practices of sovereignty that followed — settler colonialism is surely a key concept. Abundant research in recent years has shed light on state policies of the period, as well as on the ambient ideologies of race and “civilization” that together amounted to what could be called a project of eliminationism. The Canadian state itself, however, has been largely taken for granted by a historiography that treats the creation of a federal Canada and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples as quite separate processes.<sup>41</sup> The time may be right, then, for a renewed history of the Confederation era, one that unites the history of state formation with that of settler colonialism. To what extent was the former built into the latter, not simply as an explicitly expressed “policy” or “vision,” but structurally, at the level of institutions, laws, administrative practices, and political culture?

To those who insist that Canada is, was, and always has been a settler-colonial phenomenon, I offer qualified support. If the subject is “Canada” as a modern politico-juridical construct, born at the time of an all-out scramble to occupy Indigenous lands and claiming territorial sovereignty, I would say that is probably a fair characterization. However, when “Canada” is considered in spatial terms and when colonization is viewed as a process of dispossession carried out on the ground, I must point out that the settler expansion hit a high-water mark in the first half of the twentieth century. Moreover, in striking contrast to other settler-colonial states, non-Indigenous settlers have

never occupied more than a fraction of the land surface of Canada. The material bases of settler-colonialism are essentially agrarian and most of this part of the continent is unsuitable for agriculture. This is not to deny for a minute that Indigenous peoples of the North have been profoundly affected by a state oriented toward the assimilationist project of settler colonialism and determined to subjugate them. Nor is it to deny that the invasion of Indigenous homelands continues in the present day. And yet, I do want to suggest that settlers as such are no longer the main threat, for the invasion has adopted a different guise.

### Extractivism

In our own time, the most prominent form of colonialism affecting Indigenous peoples and their lands is surely the intrusion of companies exploiting the environment in pursuit of natural resources such as timber, hydroelectric power, minerals, and petroleum. Typically, multi-national corporations remove raw materials from Indigenous territories and transport them to distant parts of the world for manufacturing and sale. All around the site of extraction, environments are damaged, often with severe effects on the health and livelihoods of resident populations; meanwhile, the lion's share of benefits accrues far away. Federal and provincial governments are always involved, regulating, exacting royalties, and at times, participating directly through agencies such as Hydro-Québec. These industrial activities are characteristically situated in northern regions, in Indigenous places that largely escaped the settler onslaught because of their terrain and climate. Spatially, extractivism leans to the North and the "near-north." Temporally, it seems to grow in intensity to culminate in the resource booms of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The term "extractivism," first devised in the Latin American context to designate the process by which vulnerable countries were impoverished through resource-based economic development,<sup>42</sup> has been applied more recently to the state-abetted corporate assault on Indigenous territories in Canada. Summing up mining development projects around Yellowknife, Dene chief Don Balsillie put it this way: "... the government got royalties, the shareholders got their cash and the First Nations got the shaft."<sup>43</sup>

Modern extractivism has roots in the distant Canadian past. European coastal fisheries impacted Indigenous environments as early as the sixteenth century; in particular, the industrial-scale hunt for



whales, seals, and walruses in the St Lawrence River and the Gulf reduced and even destroyed animal stocks that Mi'kmaq and Innu peoples relied on.<sup>44</sup> There was, of course, an extractivist dimension to the fur trade as well, to the extent that it sometimes led to the extinction of beaver and sea otter over broad areas. Moreover, the extraction of timber resources sometimes operated in tandem with the settler-colonial expansion of the nineteenth century, notably in parts of New Brunswick, Québec, and Ontario, where settlers used winter work in the woods to finance their marginal subsistence farms, even as the logging and river drives served to undermine the subsistence of Indigenous peoples.<sup>45</sup> Severe though the ecological effects of early fisheries, fur trading, and logging may have been at particular moments and places, these activities all need to be understood, in a broader context, as one aspect among many of imperial/commercial or settler-colonial forms of colonialism. More recent patterns of extractivism seem sufficiently powerful and all-encompassing as to constitute a specific variety of colonialism. Highly mechanized logging operations run by large corporate enterprises can clear huge tracts of territory and then (subject to certain regulations about replanting) leave the area. This was the sort of intrusion on Indigenous lands that the Nuu-chah-nulth fended off at Meares Island in the 1980s and that Grassy Narrows First Nation in Ontario is currently fighting.<sup>46</sup>

Most readers will be familiar with these and many other instances of extractivism from the present and the recent past, but we might just quickly review a few cases before moving on to reflect on the implications for a longer-term history of colonialism. Hydroelectric developments have flooded vast stretches of Indigenous land, none more so than the gigantic James Bay project in Québec. That intrusion into their country galvanized the Cree of northern Québec into action with the result that they received compensation for lands lost in the 1970s; twenty years later, they managed to block the damming of the Great Whale River altogether. Mining is, of course, the extractivist practice par excellence, and Canadian-based multinationals have earned a terrible reputation, particularly in Latin America, for their aggressive, sometimes deadly, reactions to Indigenous opposition to the environmentally damaging pursuit of gold, copper, lithium, and other mineral wealth.<sup>47</sup> Here in Canada, mining companies are more constrained by regulations, but their operations still pose a threat to the water, the health, the fishing resources, and the spiritual landscapes of hundreds of Indigenous communities. Modern mines are

not simply tunnels bored into the ground: more commonly they take the form of open-pit operations, digging and processing immense amounts of earth; the latest techniques can extract precious metals from large quantities of relatively low-grade ore, leaching them out with toxic chemicals. Huge reservoirs of dangerous tailings and slurry accumulate on the site and these may leak into adjacent waterways or, as in the case of the Mount Polley Mine in 2014, a dam can give way and flood downstream waterways with mud, water, and highly toxic materials.<sup>48</sup> The Mount Polley disaster occurred in Northern Secwepemc territory, jeopardizing the lives and livelihood of the Soda Creek First Nation.

Where the Athabaska Tar Sands are concerned, the extraction of hydrocarbons takes on many of the characteristics of modern mining, though on an exceptionally large scale even by those standards. We've all seen the pictures of the scarred landscapes of northern Alberta, the excavation machinery, the mammoth dump trucks, and the vast lakes of sludge. The production of bitumen pollutes the water, the air, and the land of Cree and Dene people living in the Athabaska watershed, imperilling human and animal lives.<sup>49</sup> Further, since this semi-raw material is made to be shipped abroad for refinement, it has to be transported across Indigenous lands in pipelines and then through Indigenous coastal waters on tankers, all of which poses major threats, to the environment in general, but more specifically to the foundations of Indigenous life over broad areas. Some have labeled this and other extractivist practices "ecocide," a term that others associate quite directly with genocide.<sup>50</sup>

Is extractivism simply a renewed version of settler colonialism, as some have argued?<sup>51</sup> Insofar as projects such as the Athabaska Tar Sands have the potential to eliminate the Indigenous presence in some areas and in that states of settler-colonial origin (Canada and Alberta in this case) are actively involved, that elision may have some basis. However, fundamental differences separate these two forms of colonialism. Contemporary extractivism is carried on mainly by multinational corporations of shifting ownership. Their activities are part of a global land-grab that threatens Indigenous peoples around the world.<sup>52</sup> Settler colonialism may also be considered a worldwide phenomenon of a sort, but its focus is local and national because it is all about settlers taking the place of Natives on the land. Extractivist enterprises, by contrast, have little interest in permanent territorial control; indeed, mining and oil companies have a reputation for abandoning played-

out sites and disappearing from the scene, leaving governments and local populations to assume the costs of cleaning up. The devastated landscapes produced by mining, logging, and flooding are no place for outsiders to establish homes for themselves.

Extractivism also has some affinities with imperial/commercial intrusions, not least in the way it can be tributary to overseas centres of power toward which wealth is drained. And like that older form of colonialism, extractivism can operate through infiltration and cooptation. The Australian-owned Ekati diamond mine in the Northwest Territories led the way in the mining industry by securing some Indigenous buy-in through job guarantees and other tangible benefits for Dene communities.<sup>53</sup> To the extent that extractivist activities jeopardize traditional northern livelihoods, they help create an Indigenous labour force ready for recruitment as workers; some have likened this mechanism to Marx's concept of primitive accumulation.<sup>54</sup> Appealing to Indigenous interests at another level, the pipeline industry has been working to secure the participation of Native communities as partners with an ownership stake.<sup>55</sup> Whether such strategies are cynical ploys and whether or not Indigenous people can genuinely benefit from active participation in resource industries is not for me to say. I only want to note that extractivist enterprises are capable of working in partnership with Indigenous peoples, whereas the only way Natives could cooperate with settler colonialism was by disappearing.

Settler colonialism has not gone away, but the dynamics of colonialism have changed over time as extractivism has come to the fore in place of literal colonization by settlers. Running parallel to this shift in on-the-ground processes of dispossession has been a change in the political, legal, and ideological expressions of colonialism. We might see the 1969 White Paper as the apogee of settler-colonial politics in that it proposed complete assimilation through the eradication of Native status.<sup>56</sup> It was defeated by Indigenous political mobilizations, a force that, over the past four decades, has compelled successive governments to back away from bluntly eliminationist policies, in favour of what Glen Coulthard calls, "a seemingly more conciliatory set of discourses and institutional practices ... [of] *recognition* and *accommodation*."<sup>57</sup> Think, for example, of the Constitution Act of 1982 affirming "existing aboriginal and treaty rights," the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and the more flexible approach to treaty negotiations on the part of federal authorities who no longer insist on the formal extinguishment of all territorial rights. Even an otherwise

unsympathetic government like that of Stephen Harper was willing to issue an apology for the residential school system. This latter gesture, Coulthard points out, was predicated on circumscribing the issue so as to exclude all other aspects of colonialism, while situating the residential schools episode safely in the past.<sup>58</sup> The Trudeau Government has gone even further in the direction of making every possible symbolic gesture, apologizing for past wrongs and honouring Indigenous cultures, while recognizing certain circumscribed forms of self-determination.

As long as the damages of settler colonialism do not actually have to be reversed, and as long as the progress of extractivist colonialism is not halted, governments have shown a willingness to compromise with Indigenous demands for the recognition of cultural and legal rights. Some measures, such as the increasing reliance on “Impact and Benefit Agreements,” a kind of privatized version of treaty negotiations whereby the federal government stands aside and allows direct agreements between northern First Nations and mining companies, have the effect of both facilitating extraction and enhancing a sense of Indigenous self-government.<sup>59</sup> In a neoliberal climate, and at a time when governments are more interested in extracting wealth from Indigenous lands than in transforming them into a homeland for colonists, states can entertain concessions that would have been unthinkable in the era of strict settler-colonialism. Meanwhile, the injuries inflicted by centuries of colonialism remain and the destructive invasion of the land advances at an accelerating pace.

## Conclusion

Settler colonialism may well be “a structure, not an event,” but it is worth reminding ourselves that it is not timeless. The logic of elimination and replacement emerged in particular settings and at certain times, while other versions of colonialism prevailed elsewhere. In some parts of the world, such as the Canary Islands and much of the Caribbean, the Indigenous presence was wiped away entirely through the brutal effects of colonization, but that was not the case in Canada overall. In this part of North America, Indigenous peoples faced a particularly varied array of colonialisms and over an exceptionally prolonged period of time. The fact that the largest portion of Canada’s land surface was unsuitable for agricultural colonization was surely a major factor favouring Indigenous survivance. Nevertheless, people

here have had to contend with other kinds of colonialism, notably the imperial/commercial and extractivist varieties described above, both of them well-adapted to northern environments. None was benign in its effects, though only settler colonialism concentrated on the full and complete transfer of land to arrivants. Settler colonialism stands out also as a fundamental force behind the creation of a territorial nation-state.

Like other settler states, Canada wrapped itself in a comforting historical metanarrative that naturalized dispossession while tracing a line of continuity, suggesting that the modern nation-state was immanent from the moment the first explorers and colonists arrived. In settler-national historical thinking, “Canada” and colonists are synonymous: both imply modernity and both will find their realization in a transcontinental federation. History can then unfold after Confederation in a setting where settler sovereignty is taken for granted as normal and natural. To counteract such complacent self-delusion, a *longue durée* view is helpful. This approach places settler society and the settler state in perspective, revealing them to be historical, rather than timeless, phenomena, and so denaturalizing them. Recognizing that other forms of colonial intrusion have preceded, existed alongside, and succeeded settler colonialism can help free us from the settler-colonial mindset. An order based on territorial dispossession is not, and never has been, normal, natural, and inevitable.

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