"Should this generation, the first to our national revival divide our homeland and heritage? Quite the contrary! It should settle Judea and Samaria – our forefathers’ land… Our historical right to this land is eternal and unquestionable… being engraved in the book of books…” (Menchem Begin, Israel’s fifth Prime Minister; quoted in Naor, 2004: 492–493).

“We shall, we shall liberate Palestine and make the life of the infidels hell… a million martyrs are marching on Jerusalem… We shall not rest until we hoist our flag on the Jerusalem great mosques (Yassir Arafat, Palestinian President, http://news.walla.co.il/?w=/1/557023&tb=1/2813312).

These quotations are typical of the thick Zionist and Palestinian discourses expressing the immense national, historical and religious importance of the West Bank (‘Judea and Samaria’). Many among the two nations see the region as the cradle and essence of their identity, and still many deny the right of the ‘other’ to enjoy the same historical and political rights. These attitudes form a pivotal basis for Israel’s four decades of colonial occupation of the West Bank, and the protracted Zionist–Palestinian struggle.

This well known fact needs to be reiterated as an entry point for a discussion on Derek Gregory’s important recent book The Colonial Present, hinting at the praise and critique I develop below. The praise refers to the laudable critical line of analysis, and the welcome engagement of one of the world’s leading cultural geographers with a contemporary, painful and very material political struggle. The critique, on the other hand, regards Gregory’s questionable conceptualization of sovereign power, the flattening of difference between American and Israeli colonialism(s), the overlooking of the dialectics of violence and deep chasms in Israeli society, and the association of Zionism and Nazism. I shall proceed from the broad to the specific.

Valued interventions

Gregory’s book makes several broad and generally convincing claims. Using a Sa’idian inspired approach he analyses the Orientalist discourses prevailing in the United States after
the 9–11 al-Kai’da attack, showing how these framed the “Othering” of a ‘barbarian’ Arab and Muslim Middle East, as a legitimizing foundation for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Gregory adds Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and crackdown on Palestinian insurgence to paint a picture of an American-led colonial surge, using the 9–11 attack to propel deep-seated expansionist ambitions. The book provides a detailed ‘blow by blow’ account of events, operations and media coverage of the colonization of the three locations, framed by theories derived from recent scholarly thinking on sovereignty, spatiality and power. The three episodes of the ‘colonial present’ are analytically linked to the condition of ‘colonial modernity’ drawing on the long and bloody heritage of European-White conquest of ‘uncivilized’ parts of the world.

As noted, there is much to commend in the book, not the least the open academic engagement with the aggressive politics of domination, discussion of spatial justice, and injection of geographical content to analyses of ‘the war on terror’, with the subsequent illumination of the darker sides of globalization. The approach and topic are timely and worthy, given the recent retreat of much cultural and social geography into verbose analyses of abstract discourses and symbols, and against the new wave of McCarthyism now threatening critical scholars in North America. An open challenge of this nature to mainstream discourse is both bold and timely.

The systematic integration of geographical knowledge is another of the book’s strong contributions. Gregory manages to present a thoroughly spatialized account, rarely found in the litany of material on terror, Islam and American militarism. He shows how central is the Western perception of space to the colonial endeavor, and how enmeshed are Orientalist discourses with ‘imaginative geographies’, where localities and identities are constructed to separate and stratify ‘us’ and ‘them’, denigrating ‘them’ to the fringes of humanity through ceaseless spatial performances, such as mapping, media images, popular culture and the association of ‘bad’ with specific groups and places. The outcome, as Gregory convincingly shows, is the construction of a hegemonic discourse of degradation and marginalization of the Eastern Other, resulting in a (cultural and mental) ‘architecture of enmity’. However, beyond the praise, the book displays some notable deficiencies. Let us begin with theory and move gradually closer to Israel/Palestine.

Colonialism(S), sovereignty and exceptions

A first theoretical question regards Gregory’s use of Agamben’s insightful work on sovereign power. Indeed, the people of Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine may be conceptualized as existing in a state of exception, bearing a status of homines sacri, whose lives are dispensable with impunity. However, Gregory’s use of these concepts may suffer from over-sophistication. Let me elaborate: Agamben critiques is mainly directed at liberal perceptions (illusion?) of democratic sovereignty. His stunning analysis shows how sovereign power is constructed through flexible discretion to occasionally exclude some people from full membership in a political community. Hence, the potency of turning a citizen into a homo sacer, through the imposition of state of exception lies in what he calls the act of “abandonment”, that is, the (actual, or threatened) stripping away of legal rights and protections, and the subsequent exposure of dispensable “bare life”. This framework can illuminate the mechanisms of Israel’s control over its internal Palestinian minority, whose members are officially full citizens, but are occasionally subject to assaults on their rights, property and personal security.

But in Afghanistan, Iraq or Palestine, present colonialism was based from the outset on an open imposition of a state of military exception, using martial law and (almost) indiscriminate violence. Common for the three cases is precisely a lack of legitimate modern sovereignty.
Under the colonial present, bare life is therefore a daily routine, not an exception. When the state of exception becomes the norm, with almost habitual abuse of international law and human rights, Agamben’s insightful theory loses its capacity to explain the preservation of governing power. Hence, these concepts may complicate, rather than clarify the understanding of the colonial present. The cases at hand present more straightforward examples of colonial conquest without incorporation, and Gregory’s invocation of Agamben appears to take the discussion to zones of excessive subtlety and complexity.

The book’s theoretical approach leads Gregory to make another questionable move – flattening the difference between American and Israeli colonialisms. The United States is indeed a major military and financial supporter of Zionist colonialism, with its foreign policy being deeply influenced by Israeli concerns. There are also conspicuous military links between the two forces, and certain similarities in the methods of control over indigenous populations in Iraq and the West Bank. However, there are also major differences between the two colonial projects, stemming from the very different goals, methods and inner protocols of American and Zionist colonialisms. To help clarify the difference it may be useful to return to the seminal work of Fredrickson (1988), who differentiates, intra-alia, between settling and military colonialisms.

Unlike its contemporary American counterpart, Jewish colonialism in the West Bank has developed around the issue of settlement. The political geography of control has been shaped predominantly to expand and protect Jewish settlements, secure uninterrupted access for the settlers and constrain – often violently – the rights of Palestinians who threaten Israel’s self-defined territorial interests. Importantly, Jewish colonialism has also operated internally, initiating major settlement efforts within ‘Israel Proper’ (that is, inside the Green Line, recognized internationally as its sovereign area).

Under a regime I have defined as ‘settling ethnocracy’ (Yiftachel & Ghanem, 2004), Israel built over 700 settlements in its ‘internal frontiers’, turning the Palestinian community within Israel into a ‘trapped minority’, using a spatial strategy of creating ‘fractured regions’ (Yiftachel, 2006). The regime’s major task has been to Judaize contested regions and power structures. This is a typical agenda found in ethnocratic regimes, such as Serbia, Sri Lanka, Sudan and 19th Century Canada and Australia. This approach was implemented since the 1960s in the newly occupied territories, which for many Zionists appears like a ‘natural extension’ of the internal frontier project. Settlement in the Palestinian occupied territories has served two main purposes – Judaizing the core of the historical (Biblical) parts of the Land of Israel, as well as further fragmentation and weakening Palestinian nationalism. The major architect of this policy over four decades was of course, Ariel Sharon (Kimmerling, 2003).

I bring this short and partial description in order to demonstrate the national and religious underpinning of Israeli colonialism in the West Bank, and highlight its profound differences with the current wave of American military and ‘mobile’ type of colonialism. Israeli settler colonialism proceeded, and is likely to outlast, the current surge of American colonialism. Yet, like in most ethnocracies, the expansionist ethnicization project has been highly controversial, causing widespread discrimination, dispossession and conflict. Subsequently, it has pitted leftist and mainly secular Israelis (Jewish and Arab) against their rightist and chiefly nationalist and religious counterparts for nearly four decades, causing repeated political crises, largely overlooked by Gregory.

The problem with Gregory’s account here is, ironically, similar to the one (rightly) attributed to the Orientalist discourse — painting the ‘other’ as monolithic, undifferentiated and threatening. Far too little attention is given in his analysis to the chasms dividing Israeli society.
precisely over the issue of settler colonialism and treatment of the Palestinians. These have caused major upheavals, including the fall of four Prime Ministers and the assassination of one, and a deep crisis in internal Jewish—Palestinian relations — all barely making a mention in Gregory’s account. Strangely, his account is sprinkled with a great many hints to these divisions, as he uses data gathered by Israeli anti-occupation and human rights organizations, the critical work on Israeli and ex-Israeli scholars, and the courageous reporting of oppositional Israeli journalists.1 The point here is not to glorify Israeli resistance to four decades of settler colonialism, which surely has not been effective enough, but rather to paint a richer and more credible account of the (shaky?) colonial present.

De-colonization?

This omission is also analytically damaging. While it would be unfair to ask analysts of contemporary conflicts to engage in risky predictions, Gregory’s account fails to identify the structural undercurrents mobilizing for an Israeli de-colonization. These do not only involve small ideological leftist groups which have been ‘biting’ at the fringes of Zionist discourse in the name of justice and equality, but also a growing center, composed mainly of the middle classes, who seek the globalization of Israel’s society and economy, and who are increasingly willing to pay the price of retreat from ‘fatherland’ territory. The prevailing mood in Israel ranges between a discernable will to confront the religious territorial mystification of ‘Judea and Samaria’, and a more pervasive tendency to ‘embrace’ the settlers, acknowledge Jewish connection to the holy places, while partially de-colonizing for the sake of preserving the Jewish nature of the state.

Due to Gregory’s oversight of this undercurrent of change, readers of his book may be surprised to learn of the recent Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and parts of the West Bank soon after the book’s publication. Significantly, this was the first time Israel evacuated Jewish colonial settlements in the Land of Israel (some were evacuated in Sinai earlier), being part of a new geopolitical stage of Zionism I have termed ‘oppressive consolidation’ (Yiftachel, 2006). The withdrawal was followed by a further shift in the Israeli discourse on the occupation after the eruption of several highly publicized conflicts between the government and the settlers during 2005 and early 2006. As a result, in the recent 2006 elections, for the first time in Israel’s history, a majority of parliamentarians (70 of 120) are elected on platforms calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state, that is, to end or reduce Israeli colonialism. To be sure, the crippled Palestinian ‘state’ designated by the Israeli elites, ghettoized as it is by the new separation barrier (wall) constructed by Israel illegally in the West bank, is not likely to bring liberation for Palestinians. It is more likely to resemble the notorious Bantustans and propel Israel/Palestine further into the process of ‘creeping apartheid’ (see Yiftachel, 2006). Yet, Gregory’s portrayal of a monolithic Zionism has blinded him to the onset of Israeli withdrawal, limited as it may be.

Related to the above is another conceptual problem — typical to Orientalist and ‘Agambian’ accounts, namely the diminution of local agency, and the subsequent overlooking of the dialectics of violence, which come to their sharpest contrast in the deadly dance of state and local terror. It is acknowledged — as ably depicted by Gregory — that the construction of

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1 Gregory quotes with approval a wide range of dissenting Israeli voices, including scholars such as Benny Morris, Ilan Pappe, Tania Reinhart, Gabi Piterberg, Oren Yiftachel, Jeff Halper, Eyal Weizman, Ella Shohat and Baruch Kimmerling; as well as journalists Akiva Eldar, Yizhak Laor, Meron Benvenisti, Amira Hass, Gidon Levi and Uri Avneri.
Otherness among colonial societies is a formidable cultural-political force in shaping attitudes and actions towards the ‘barbarian’ locals. Yet, colonial imaginations are constantly reshaped by local, often violent, resistance. Gregory is well aware of Palestinian terrorism, and rightly condemns it as a ‘crime against humanity’ (p. 105). However, he gives insufficient analytical weight to the manner in which violence, and particularly vicious suicide attacks and counter-racist Occidental discourses, have reshaped the contours of present Orientalism.

Diminishing the ‘agency of the weak’ has also led Gregory to underplay the role of Hamas, whose victory in the 2006 Palestinian elections underscores the central role of religion in mobilizing the masses. Religious zeal is not only the preserve of ‘fundamental’ movements, but also frames the narratives of more secular nationalists, such as Begin and Arafat quoted at the outset. Local violence, resting on religious and ethno-national foundations, is therefore not confined to the manipulation of Orientalist discourses, but constitutes a structural force in shaping the ever-changing colonial geographies.

Local noises

Let us move now to some problems with the detailed analysis of Israel/Palestine. While it is impossible to expect a comprehensive historical account in the roughly 100 pages Gregory devotes to Israel/Palestine, the reader should be aware of some question marks hanging over his text. Gregory draws entirely on secondary sources, but some of the problems can be traced to his framework and analytical assumptions.

First, the ‘colonial past’ of Palestine is presented as beginning with Zionist colonization (p. 78). While most readers are no doubt aware of the history of the land, it should perhaps be mentioned that Zionism is only the last in a long list of colonizers eyeing this contested land, including, but not limited to, the Romans, Persians, Byzantines, Muslims, Crusaders, Ottomans and British, and — critically — the early Hebrews emerging from the Egyptian exile to their biblical promised land. The significant connections between the colonial present and ancient pasts, as framed within national and religious narratives, is persistently underplayed by Gregory’s account.

Second, Gregory overlooks the changing nature of Zionism. Nowhere does he mention that pre-1948 Zionist movement was mainly composed of Jewish refugees or emigrants forced out of their previous states, mainly in Europe. Jewish settlement proceeded through land purchase, not conquest, with Jews managing to purchase less than five percent of British Palestine/Land of Israel before 1948. Jews did organize local militias and prepared themselves for the expected war with the majority of Arabs who maintained a rejectionist position towards Zionism and fought for its destruction. As we know, this resulted in the Palestinian disaster (the ‘Nakbah’), massive ethnic cleansing and the still open wound of unsettled Palestinian refugees. But pre-1948 Zionism, which I have termed ‘colonialism of survival’, is surely politically and morally different from its later oppressive stages.

Third, while discussing the UN 181 partition proposal, which allocated 56 percent of British Palestine/Land of Israel to the Jewish community, then just a third of the population, Gregory fails to mention that this allocation was influenced by the hundreds of thousands of Jewish Holocaust survivors waiting in nearby refugee camps. To be sure, the Holocaust and pervasive anti-Jewish racism during the first half of the 20th Century should not be used to gloss over Zionist oppression of the Palestinians, as often attempted by Jewish apologists. Yet, this historical setting can neither be ignored in an analysis claiming to draw on principles of anti-racism and historical justice.
Finally, and related to the above, this critique must confront the thorny issue of comparing Israel’s colonial rule with the Nazi regime. Gregory presents such a comparison (pp. 133–134), and while he is careful to note some differences, the association he makes between the two regimes is distorted and ill conceived (as is the common Israeli invocation of Nazism in relations to the Arabs). This harms the book’s integrity. The comparison is of course intentionally provocative since the author could have ‘safely’ associated the Israel with more comparable settler and/or racist regimes, such as his own Canadian state, Australia or White South Africa, or to other states performing ethnic cleansing, like post-war Czechoslovakia or Poland.

No matter how careful, a comparison of Zionism to Nazism cannot be partial, alluding ‘surgically’ to some similarities in the oppressive methods used by the two regimes. Such a comparison inevitably ‘carries’ with it the total image of Nazism, which destroyed large parts of Europe and executed the worst genocide in human history against a weak unarmed Jewish community which posed no threat to Germany. The differences between the two cases are so vast that there is no point in outlining them further, beyond noting the wholly inappropriate and gross falsehood associated with this comparison. One must ponder here on the responsibility of scholars committed to justice and credibility, sadly overlooked by Gregory in his rush to overplay the critical card.

To conclude, however, and despite the deficiencies, let me repeat that the book is an important and timely contribution to geographical literature. By foregrounding the materiality, violence and sufferings involved with the Orientalist colonial present, Gregory makes not only a geographical contribution to the understanding of our troubled contemporary world, but very appropriately brings the contemporary world back into our geographical discussions. The book sketches a path for an engaged cultural and political geography on which many geographers will hopefully dare to travel.

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References