

The Crisis of Critique and Academic Antizionism—Before and After October 7

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Abstract

During the last two decades there has been a large-scale production of texts that might be grouped under the common heading of “academic antizionism,” which strive to equate Zionism with colonialism. However, the labeling of Israel as a settler colony raises multiple questions with respect to the main intention of these scholarly enterprises and their activist agenda, and particularly to their politics and scientific methodology. This “theoretically” anchored criticism often turns into accusations of “apartheid,” “ethnic cleansing,” and even “genocide,” without empirical verification, whenever there is a new chapter of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—and especially so after the October 7 Hamas massacre and the subsequent Gaza war.

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THE CRISIS OF CRITIQUE

The study of the ideological structure of present-day antizionism invites a multifaceted approach. There are political, sociological, but also properly epistemological elements in play, which are to be considered against the backdrop of the contemporary crisis of social critique. I believe that the contemporary crisis of critique can be characterized by a growing uncertainty concerning its tasks and normative standards, which often results in forms of “conceptual radicality.”

My question is: Why is it specifically antizionism that is accorded such an important critical function in the “activist” mindset formed by the crisis of critique? What are those elements of critique, styles of reasoning, and “associative mergers” that are assembled under the heading of antizionism? According to my hypothesis, the emergence of radical forms of antizionism can be linked to a number of theoretical failures in

some branches of critical social science, among them conceptual radicality, the focus on moralizing critique, and even the recourse to conspiratorially minded explanations perceived as anti-hegemonic. Also, in these critical “studies” particularities and ambiguities are disregarded and flattened while the categories of critique are becoming more and more binary in character.

Assuredly, radicalism in critique exists even without the question of Israel and Zionism as a result of the crisis of critique; however, this radical outlook has found Israel to be its ideal target. How and why this happened would necessitate a long and thorough historical and conceptual investigation of which this article can only accomplish a tiny part by focusing on the criticism of Zionism and Israel as a Western-type of “white settler colonialism,” and by having recourse to an epistemological, instead of a merely political, framework of analysis. It intends to show that the problematics of the “new antisemitism,” besides anti-Jewish motivations,

stem largely from the epistemological shortcomings and radical ambitions of contemporary social critique. It should demonstrate that clear-cut categories of contemporary critical social science cannot easily contend with the peculiarities of Jewish history, Zionism/Jewish nationalism. Jews are predisposed to figure at the juncture of social critique and the conspiratorial mode of thought, and to be categorized by excessively critical and radicalized conceptual schemes, thereby constituting a “Jewish problem.”

Beyond the epistemological insecurity stemming from the uncertainty of categorization, Jews are also affected by the “white” tag appended on them. The whiteness framework at once helps to prove that Jews are not a minority anymore, as they are devoid of “color,” thereby erasing Jews as a group and also antisemitism, declaring them obsolete, quasi non-existent; and, in an intensified critical or accusatory mode, it suggests that Jews are in fact the paradigmatic oppressors, as they are also endowed with the emphatically understood “white” color. The “white” label directly triggers the category of “colony”/“settler colony” applied to Israel. In this respect, I intend to explore the range of perspectives of Israel conceived as the last existing “colonial entity” in academic publications produced by a sort of “activist” social science.

The analysis concerns the application of the concept of colonialism to the case of Israel, and that of whiteness to Jews, and the subsequent political criticism, coming from and bolstered by a certain academic scholarship. This criticism often turns into accusations of “apartheid,” “ethnic cleansing,” and even “genocide,” whenever there is a new chapter of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—especially so after the October 7 Hamas massacre and the subsequent Gaza war.

“ACTIVISM” IN CRITIQUE AND “PERSUASIVE DEFINITIONS”

In the wake of the late Adorno, the peculiar “critical mindset” that emerged in some social

and even legal studies fields and has been spreading throughout the political left the last two-three decades could be called “activist.” “Activism” assumes a leading role when theory becomes so politicized as to serve only political ends, completely ignoring the interpretation of empirical reality. Above all, Adorno objected to the emphasis placed on quick and drastic social change at the expense of developing a workable social theory. He believed that giving up on reason and engaging in theoretically baseless and unjustified discourse is the hallmark of blind radicalism and “activism.”¹ It is when concept formation is overdetermined by political stance and critical attitude and when the explicit or implicit call for political action takes precedence over theoretical reflection, that we talk about “activism”: “Where experience is blocked or altogether absent, praxis is damaged and therefore longed for, distorted, and desperately overvalued. Thus what is called the problem of praxis is interwoven with the problem of knowledge.”²

Whereas Adorno could maintain that the main problem with “activism” is that it gets rid of theory, what we witness concerning today’s “critical theories” is that “activism” is already *built into* theory. For what is interesting for our purposes in Adorno’s thoughts on “*activism*” is *not so much the question of botched practice, which is blind to theory, but the cases when practice has already colonized theory itself: the practical-political orientation parasitizing both thought and theory.*

The idea of “activism” is ideally captured by the utilization of concepts that are by their very nature critical and avoid both theoretical and empirical validations. The terminology of critical theory is still used in contemporary activist academia, but it is often reconstructed as “ethical,” emotive, or even “moralizing” terms, losing their original legal, social, and historical connotations. This is the epitome of what Charles L. Stevenson termed “persuasive definitions.”

In any “persuasive definition” the term defined is a familiar one, whose meaning is both descriptive and strongly emotive. The purport

of the definition is to alter the descriptive meaning of the term, usually by giving it greater precision within the boundaries of its customary vagueness; but the definition does not make any substantial change in the term's emotive meaning.³

And further:

Our language abounds with words which [. . .] have both a vague descriptive meaning and a rich emotive meaning. The descriptive meaning of them all is subject to constant redefinition. The words are prizes which man seeks to bestow on the qualities of his own choice.⁴

The concept of “persuasive definitions” seems to capture well the type of interpretations characteristic of “academic antizionism”—whether those appear in academic articles or journalistic opinion pieces and statements. When used in reference to Israel, terms like “colonialism,” “apartheid,” “genocide,” and others seem to be stretched to the point where their descriptive meaning is lost or rendered ambiguous, while their emotive meaning remains intact. This type of criticism is mostly devoid of objectivity grounded in the social and historical contexts of the present and is instead predicated only on subjective suffering, emotions, and sentiments expressed in the indignant mode.⁵ When discussing Israel, terms like “genocide,” “apartheid,” and similar words—which refer to the most horrible and unfair circumstances conceivable—are employed to convey a fundamental and even fundamentalist moral outrage presented as socially and historically grounded critique.

Since the October 7 Hamas massacre and the subsequent Gaza war, this politically minded activist and emotive critique of Zionism and Israel has become even more prevalent, which is testified by the usage of the concept of “genocide.” The critical discourse in question is characterized by some conceptual reversals, as the Hamas massacre and its potentially genocidal

nature or intention are not discussed at all (and it is hardly even mentioned as an event), while Israel is outright being accused of genocide, and this already before the actual war has unfolded.

So far, radical antizionism voiced as anti-colonial engagement has been mainly studied in the context of political rhetoric. In this article, I will expand the scope of the research by exploring the various ways of conceptualizing “colony” and the multiple forms of colonialism analogies with regard to Israel within academic discourse. I will try to show that the political rhetoric employed by academics regarding the Gaza war and the theme of “Israeli genocide” have long been discussed in certain relatively new academic disciplines, being closely linked to the “colonial” view of Israel.

In fact, there has been a lot of effort expended on establishing the colonial characteristics of Israel and its genocidal nature—this latter supposedly stemming from its coloniality. Therefore, when it comes to a real war, it seems that *this original position on “Israeli genocide” is often just being reaffirmed in newspaper articles, social media posts or statements written by public intellectuals and academics without much empirical validation.* Is there a certain conceptual overdetermination already at work in the academic conceptualizations, in which empirical examples and comparisons only play a subordinate role (if any)? Isn't it the case that when academic critics painstakingly strive to establish the colonial nature of Zionism and Israel in the framework of such disciplines as “critical whiteness studies,” “settler-colonial studies,” and the like, the authors mostly turn to a sort of “deductive” approach and turn their critical concepts into “persuasive definitions”? What is the method of the academic disciplines in question for establishing the Israeli “colonial fact,” and what are the themes associated with “Israeli coloniality”? It is this academic foundation of antizionist topics that I intend to examine; but first, I should like to analyze briefly some reactions to October 7 by academics and the way they employ the concept of “genocide.”

DECLARATIONS DENOUNCING ISRAEL AFTER OCTOBER 7

I propose as a starting point of the analysis several significant statements on the war in Gaza and the role of Israel following the October 7 pogrom, which were all published very early in the conflict: at a time when the Israeli ground operation barely began. These are statements by professional academic bodies: university departments, professional associations, student unions; open letters and articles by reputed university professors and public intellectuals.

For example, the statement made by professors of communication and media experts on October 18 says the following: “Israeli government and army officials are using genocidal language in reference to Palestinians, including terms such as ‘human animals’, ‘barbarians’, and ‘savages’”—from which they conclude that Israel is preparing to commit genocide (although the language mentioned was mainly used to qualify Hamas). They also emphasize the importance of looking at the “context” of the October 7 atrocities, however this invariably alludes to their conceptual framework, and not to findings: “the colonial context of Israel’s more than 50 years long military occupation of Palestinian territories and 16 years of siege on Gaza—repeatedly condemned by the UN and human rights organizations.”⁶ Likewise, another statement, “Sociologists in Solidarity with Gaza and the Palestinian People,” published also in mid-October, wrote:

We are witnessing internationally supported genocide. This latest siege comes as a continuation and escalation of the daily violence Palestinians faced for decades from Israeli colonization; an apartheid regime whose occupation is in clear violation of international law, but persists with the support of powerful governments globally. Furthermore, the dehumanizing language used by heads of state, military leaders, and journalists throughout the West, has begun to increase anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim sentiment and violence.⁷

Scholars of international law, conflict studies, and genocide studies issued a particularly lengthy statement on October 15, writing that

we are compelled to sound the alarm about the possibility of the crime of genocide being perpetrated by Israeli forces against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. [. . .] The Palestinians of the Gaza Strip constitute a substantial proportion of the Palestinian nation, and are being targeted by Israel because they are Palestinian. The Palestinian population of Gaza appears to be presently subjected by the Israeli forces and authorities to widespread killing, bodily and mental harm, and unviable conditions of life—against a backdrop of Israeli statements which evidence signs of intent to physically destroy the population.⁸

According to this text, Israel is waging a war against the Palestinian nation and people, with the motive of destroying it, which is asserted without mention of the October 7 pogrom (it is casually alluded to in four words). Instead, we encounter the conception of “eternal genocide” that Israel has been committing possibly for decades even without being in a state of war. As the statement puts it: “The pre-existing conditions in the Gaza Strip had already prompted discussions of genocide prior to the current escalation.”

There are dozens, possibly hundreds of these statements, but the blueprint is essentially the same. First, they either don’t mention at all what happened on October 7, when Israel was attacked, or mention it in a brief sentence without ever analyzing its significance. Second, and in contrast, they invariably intend to draw attention to Israel’s “genocidal intention and practice,” “seventy-five years of occupation and apartheid,” and “Israeli settler colonialism” as “root causes” of the conflict. Sociologists, seemingly in contradiction with their own basic methodology, advocate to consider unhistorical and essentialized “root causes” that they find in the “history” of Zionist “colonization.” These

“root causes,”⁹ without further consideration of more recent events and present-day contexts, would be solely responsible for the pogrom of October 7 in the eyes of the signatories, although this is only euphemistically and casually mentioned in the text as “recent Hamas violence against Israeli civilians.” Likewise, Israel’s actions in the Gaza war are taken to be in organic continuity with its previous “aggressions” and, generally, “oppression.” Third, there is also much emphasis put on declarations by certain Israeli politicians and the “dehumanization” of Palestinians, along with the assertion that Palestinians are killed because they are Palestinians, which seemingly points to the genocidal intention.

In a recent interview, Amos Goldberg, an Israeli historian, aptly summarized these arguments, trying to give them a somewhat more systematic form:

As a historian, if you look at the overall picture, you have all the elements of genocide. There is clear intent: the president, the prime minister, the minister of defense, and many high-ranking military officers have expressed that very openly. We have seen countless incitements to turn Gaza into rubble, claims that there are no innocent people there, etc. Popular calls for the destruction of Gaza are heard from all quarters of society and the political leadership. A radical atmosphere of dehumanization of the Palestinians prevails in Israeli society. [. . .] The outcome is as would be expected: tens of thousands of innocent children, women, and men killed or injured, the almost-total destruction of infrastructure, intentional starvation and the blocking of humanitarian aid, mass graves of which we still don’t know the full extent, mass displacement, etc. There is also reliable testimony of summary executions, not to mention the numerous bombings of civilians in so-called “safe zones.” Gaza as we knew it does not exist anymore. Thus, the outcome fits perfectly with the intentions.¹⁰

The main point in question is whether the Israeli government/army have had the intention of committing genocide against the Palestinians, as these texts confidently assert. A key aspect of the legal definition of genocide is genocidal intent, especially in its narrower and stricter version: “The acts specified have to be undertaken with the intent to destroy the group. In some ways this is as important as the acts themselves.”¹¹ A looser interpretation is rather based on the knowledge of the outcomes: “that the act or acts are committed by the perpetrator knowing that they will or are likely to destroy the group.”¹² The statements cited clearly refer to intent, while the Goldberg interview somehow gestures also toward the looser definition.

As much as the rhetorical saber rattling of politicians are attributed utmost importance—although most of the time they are speaking about the terrorists, and much less about the Palestinian population—other important aspects of the conflict are totally neglected. As the international lawyer Barak Medina wrote: “The accusation of genocide is based exclusively on statements made by several Israeli politicians. Most of these statements were made by office-holders who have no control over setting Israel’s policies.”¹³ The extreme-right parties have not been members of the war cabinet, and have been regularly reprimanded after uttering extremist statements. At the same time, there isn’t any direct proof that Israel intentionally and systematically targeted civilians, on the contrary: the evacuation orders and the construction of “safe zones” should testify to the opposite intention. It is also in dispute whether Israel hindered the entry of humanitarian aid for any sustained period, while it is well-known that Hamas systematically looted and hoarded those for its own benefit.

However, it is easy to construct a straight line from rhetoric to reality: look, what they promised is now accomplished: “Gaza turned into rubble.”¹⁴ Now, one could say that even if there was no clear intention of destroying large parts of the civilian population, it could have been known that this

war would lead precisely to this outcome. However, the total number of deaths cannot be known as of yet, and especially not the number of civilians among them, since Hamas authorities are suspected of wildly exaggerating the casualties while refusing to make even this distinction.

Most importantly, the most crucial element is missing from the picture, systematically avoided in the statements propagating the accusation of genocide: Hamas. As Medina put it:

The supporters of genocide accusation insist on ignoring the Hamas's extensive military use of civilian infrastructure, the practice of using civilians as human shields, and other aspects that are essential in evaluating the activities of the IDF. [. . .] To sum up, the only evidence presented to support the accusation of genocide is the scope of damage in the Gaza Strip and several statements by Israeli politicians.¹⁵

All this doesn't exclude the possibility that Israel committed war crimes, maybe even "summary executions" as Goldberg put it, which are completely different matter than genocide. But since particular "war crimes," even if based in reality, lack the emotive force of "genocide," adepts of activist critique will turn to this latter to be able to pronounce their radical and blanket denunciation of Israel.

This verdict has been in preparation for a long time. Assuredly, these declarations and analyses didn't pop up from just anywhere; they originated in, and have been legitimized by, certain frameworks created by branches of contemporary, supposedly "critical" social science. For example, in "settler colonial studies," a now academic discipline in which Israel constitutes a prime example, it is already always assumed that Israel or the "Zionists" are committing genocide against the Palestinians. Therefore, there remains nothing to verify when there is an actual conflict: the accusations are automatically triggered. And conversely: a genocide potentially committed against Israelis, or the genocidal intention of terrorists cannot be perceived, let alone

recognized. *The thought that Israel is inherently genocidal is anchored in the interpretative framework that construes it as colonial or settler-colonial in the Western style, constantly practicing oppression and apartheid.* It is an extremely simplified binary view of oppressor and oppressed where not only Palestinians never appear as actors, but where the broader context of hostile Arab and other Islamic countries is equally missing.

ACADEMIC ANTI-COLONIAL RHETORIC CONCERNING ISRAEL: POSING THE JEWISH QUESTION AGAIN

During the last two decades there has been a large-scale production of texts that might be grouped under the common heading of "academic antizionism," which strive to equate Zionism with colonialism. These texts criticize Israel and the Zionist enterprise by having recourse to scholarly tools, in most cases by the adoption of a sociological or historical outlook. They represent the output of certain disciplines that belong to a kind of "activist" social science: "critical whiteness studies," certain variants of "race studies," "colonial settler studies," and so on. These scholarly publications are significant in so far as they seem to provide a supposedly scientific interpretation: their academic prestige and scientific aura suggest that they are based on thorough research and careful analysis.

However, the equation of Zionism with colonialism, and the labeling of Israel as a colony, raises multiple questions with respect to the main intention of these scholarly enterprises and their activist agenda, and especially to their politics and scientific methodology. First and foremost, it should be noted that the qualification of "colony" is the ultimate argument against the existence of an administrative unit or state. A "colony," in the politically emphatic sense of being the product of *colonialism* (therefore distinguished from the more neutral expression of "settlement"), by definition, should not exist, as it was constituted by land grab, conquest, and the oppression, exploitation, and often displacement and even genocide

of the indigenous population. Therefore, it is illegitimate, and decolonization must take place. Also, in recent European history, the end of colonial empires teaches us that decolonization is not only desirable but possible. So now, in a postcolonial world, the existence of a colony (a neo-colony?) is a scandal, the survival of a vestige of the inglorious past of the Western nations; a past, which, furthermore, has been the subject of repentance on the part of the ex-colonial powers. *Therefore, if as a result of historical examination, a state turns out to be a colony on the interpretative level, it automatically becomes illegitimate on the normative level: it is doomed to be dismantled.* The verdict of “it should not exist as such” or just “should not exist at all” is spelled out along with the qualification of “colony.” As Tuvia Friling has put it:

Those who reject the claim that Zionism is nothing but a Hebrew incarnation of colonialism explain that the use of that term to describe, analyze, and evaluate Zionism does not arise from the need for a sharp, productive, and objective theoretical tool that can be used to analyze and explain the building of the Israeli nation and society [. . .]. It has thus become a concept that contains an explicit and a priori moral condemnation of Zionism and the State of Israel. As such, its adoption and use by scholars who identify Zionism and colonialism are no coincidence.¹⁶

However, Israel is perhaps unique or nearly so in the sense that critics have only gradually realized that it should be considered a colonial product issued of colonialism. Nobody would ever have doubted the colonial nature of parts of the British or French empires upon their foundation and all along their histories until their independence and the process of decolonization or, on the contrary, their “naturalization”/“indigenization.” There was no political argument or scientific evidence needed to understand that those entities are in fact colonies, nor the issue would ever have provoked debates.¹⁷

In contrast, and possibly as a unique case in point, the “colonial nature” of Zionism is far from being obvious. After the foundation of modern Israel, it clearly was considered as a postcolonial state, issued from anti-colonial struggle. Nowadays critics of Zionism have been enthusiastic with regard to this quasi-novel perspective, as it could have furnished them the ultimate proof of the illegitimate nature of the Jewish State. For sure, the interpretation of Israel as a colony is not entirely new, as Palestinian authors (such as Sayegh, Said) from the sixties on have written about dispossession and colonization. But in their case, it was rather obvious that their political stance determined their analyses to a large degree; this qualification was mainly the mark of their political struggle in favor of the Palestinian nationalist cause. It is slightly different with regard to the Marxist author Maxime Rodinson; notwithstanding the general opposition to the Zionist state and its dogmatic denunciation by communist parties throughout Europe from the fifties on, Rodinson did not entirely follow their logic—which is also expressed by the question mark in the title (*Israel, a colonial-settler state?*). His evaluation of Israel as colonial is restricted to the fact that Zionist settlers encountered an autochthonous population already living in Palestine that is, parts of the land was already occupied by a different people. His adoption of this “minimal definition” of colonialism helps him answer his initial question in the affirmative, but he is adamant on refuting the other colonial traits associated with “classical” Western colonies, which is also the reason why he is not advocating the dismantling of the Zionist state.¹⁸ In this sense, his procedure can be contrasted to that of other, subsequent antizionists, who, on the contrary, intended to widen the pool of colonial traits attributed to Israel. Also, Rodinson did not attribute colonialist motivations to Zionism, the lack of which, according to him, differentiated the Zionists in an absolute manner from countries building their genuinely colonial empire.¹⁹

However, the discourse on Israel as a colonial enterprise has intensified from the end of the eighties on in the writings of the Israeli new historians (Shalim, Pappé) and critical sociologists (Kimmerling, Shafir). In their wake, a large part of academic writing on Israel, and especially a whole academic branch called “colonial settler studies” (with numerous authors) have been trying to establish that Zionism is a European white settler movement, originating in European settler colonialism and resulting first in a colonial and now in an “apartheid” state. Frederick Cooper’s remark on the unhistorical vision we can often encounter in colonial studies is a perfect match here: these approaches treat “colonialism abstractly, generically, as something to be juxtaposed with an equally flat vision of European ‘modernity.’ This side of the field has focused more on stance—on critical examination of the subject position of the scholar.”²⁰

It should be noted that, in this literature, “colonialism” does not refer merely to Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza after the Six-Day War. The authors either take the modern-day history of Israel from early Zionism until today as a whole and as a colonial enterprise without further reflection and without making meaningful distinctions according to different periods; or they explicitly *affirm that no distinction should be made* between the periods of before and after the Six-Day War, as the whole history of modern-day Israel would follow the same logic from the beginning. This latter stance could be termed as a deterministic and finalistic conception of colonialism, in which the outcomes, the foundation of a country, the displacement of an autochthonous population, further occupation of territories, etc. are envisaged as a continuous process, and as already contained in the inception of the project—more precisely, in the concept of the supposed project. To be sure, the Six-Day War and the subsequent Israeli occupation of the West Bank has provided the basis on which the whole history of Zionism—by recourse to a

teleological methodology—could retrospectively be presented as a colonial enterprise in post-or anti-Zionist historiography.²¹ Also, this conception has had recourse to a very broad definition of colonialism, according to which the criteria for qualifying something as such are fairly loose and flexible, and in which colonization and colonialism are intentionally not distinguished.²²

This broad, loose, and at the same time essentialist definition of colonialism applied to the Israeli case is perfectly epitomized by the work of Gershon Shafir. Although Shafir does try to enter into the empirical details of “Israeli settler colonialism” by distinguishing between several different historical periods, he nevertheless reaffirms the necessity of applying a “single theoretical framework” in which the entire history of Zionism should be interpreted.

My intention [. . .] was to do away with the customary frameworks that analyzed Israeli society, dividing up its history between two airtightly sealed and separated periods: the pre- and post-1967 eras. To that end, I propose to use a single theoretical framework, based on the colonial dimensions of Israeli society and now on its ongoing, though still very partial, decolonization.²³

It is in fact this non-distinction, or retrospective projection, which is the condition of possibility for taking Israel *as such* as a colonial entity. Therefore, it has to be emphasized that it is precisely this conception, which should be criticized, and much less the one, which points out the possibly colonial nature of the settlements on the disputed/occupied territories after 1967, and which is a much more arguable position.²⁴ This is the reason why hereby I am not dealing with texts that point out the colonial nature of the settlements on the conquered territories after the Six-Day War. In contrast, in the texts examined, “colony” and “colonization” do not merely refer to Israeli occupation of the West Bank after 1967.

Whiteness and Jews

The perception of Jews/Zionists/Israelis as “white” has contributed to a large degree to the treatment of Israel as a colonial entity. Jews increasingly being qualified as “white” in critical academic writings on Israel can be possibly traced back to the influence of an academic branch of study, called “critical whiteness studies,”²⁵ as well as to the politics of “intersectionality” advocated by spokespeople of minority groups, which, along with postcolonial studies²⁶ has always excluded Jews as “whites,” supposedly belonging to the dominant majority.²⁷ “Critical whiteness studies” have been conceived as the interpretation of the process of “whitening,” assuming a social historical framework, which describes the successful integration of certain minority groups, including that of Jews in American society: “whiteness” is not so much about skin color (although the concept bears a lot of ambiguities), rather about the perception of the level of integration of minority groups of European origin:²⁸ history shows that discrimination against them has gradually ceased or at least attenuated over several decades. Therefore, “whiteness” as an interpretative concept, expresses a successful integration, and the process of whitening, which, in the case of American Jews, is supposed to have attained its fulfilment by the end of the second World War.

However, “whiteness” in “critical whiteness studies” is also meant to express a position of domination and privilege, thereby becoming a critical rather than a merely interpretative concept. In this sense, white people as a collectivity would benefit from their dominant position in society and are equally complicit in oppression. In this type of discourse, where “white” majority society is characterized as essentially racist, and whiteness is understood in a critical mode, the evaluation of acculturation and social mobility processes is reversed: these are now seen as negative phenomena. The representation of Jews as a successful minority could no longer find its place within this new

constellation, when preference is given to groups, a kind of “counter-cultures,” which understand themselves in strict opposition to what is considered the majority culture. “At a time when the moral imperative is to ‘be less white’, there is no identity more pernicious than that of a formerly powerless minority group that, rather than joining the struggle to dismantle whiteness, opted into it.”²⁹ These reassessments give the impression that Jews have in fact become part of the oppressive majority in multicultural societies, in which people of color are oppressed on a racial basis. This perception of Jews as white is reinforced by the image of Israel as a supposedly foreign entity in the Middle East, modeled on the historical settlements of white settlers.

The label “white” produces both an erasure—as the qualification by definition cancels out a group’s minority status—and a very sharp critique—as the white majority is insistently denounced as racist, or at least as benefiting from “systemic racism,” even if unwittingly. Since “white” has become one of the most important concepts in contemporary criticism, when it attacks “white privilege” or “white supremacy” for example, labeling people or groups as such cannot be considered anodyne.

The conceptual framework of whiteness has a dual effect when applied to Jews. Firstly, it helps to prove that Jews are no longer a minority, since they are devoid of “color,” thus erasing their group existence and the antisemitism of which they nevertheless continue to be victims: antisemitism is declared obsolete, virtually non-existent. Secondly, it seems that Jewishness functions as a kind of whiteness amplifier: when Jews are labeled as white, it is often suggested that Jews are in fact the paradigmatic oppressors. In their case the white tag will signify that they assume a position of extraordinary power, since the appendage of the “Jew” alters the meaning of “whiteness.” In fact, in this case, as a result of a supposedly progressive critique of power (through the critique of “whiteness”) those are the oldest anti-Jewish tropes, antisemitic metaphors and conspiracy theories which

will come to the fore in the guise of social critique.

It is also interesting to note that, in this critical mode, unlike other “white ethnicities,” Jews can still be identified as a clearly defined group within the “white” collectivity. Therefore, when whiteness is applied to Jews within this discursive framework—working exclusively with binary oppositions—the “Jewish question” will reappear. To sum up: *when Jews are qualified as white and as not being targeted by racist and discriminatory practices any more, they are, by the same token, taken to be part of the dominant and oppressive majority—placed on the other, the negative, side of the rigid binary.*

White Jews and Israel

In fact, when racism scholars deal with the question of Israel, they often turn to a theoretically overdetermined concept of “whiteness.” *Zionist Jews are framed as European white people settling in the Middle-East, which already prejudges of their status as colonizers. This means that the features attributed to Zionist settlers originate in their presupposed social and ideological characteristics, and much less in their actual or past practices.* From then on, the stereotypes associated with whiteness, racism, or the “ethnic state” will prevail in the interpretations, without further empirical research into the actually existing Israel or its history.

For example, according to Abigail Bakan, a Canadian racism scholar of Marxist and postcolonial obedience, American Jews had been progressively whitened during their history on American soil until the end of World War II, whereas the whitening of European Jews came about with Zionism. The two processes intersected, asserts Bakan, thereby creating the entity known as Israel.³⁰ Furthermore, Bakan thinks that the Jews remaining in the European diaspora have been further whitened as a result of the creation of Israel as a white racist state. She detects “the role of Zionism in the transition of Jewishness from non-white to a specific form of

whiteness,” what she terms as “whiteness by permission.”³¹ According to her, the price of whiteness for Jews, even if they did not become Israelis, was the ideological identification with the state of Israel, and the corresponding policies of colonialism and racism.³² Like many other authors critical of Zionism, Bakan also takes it to be totally homogenous and unambiguous, while she maintains that it is absolutely indistinguishable from other European colonial enterprises, to which, according to her, it was simply subordinated. Gabriel Piterberg has the same view: “From the moment Zionism’s goal became the resettlement of European Jews in a land controlled by a colonial European power, in order to create a sovereign political entity, it could no longer be understood as ‘just’ a central or east European nationalism; it was also, inevitably, a white-settler colonialism.”³³ Just like Gershon Shafir: “[A]t the outset, Zionism was a variety of Eastern European nationalism, that is, an ethnic movement in search of a state. But at the end of the journey it may be seen more fruitfully as a late instance of European overseas expansion, which had been taking place from the sixteenth through the early twentieth centuries.”³⁴ It would be interesting to know whether these authors think that the tens of thousands of Jewish refugees seeking a new home in Palestine after the Shoah were also the part of this “ethnic movement,” this century-old “European expansion.” Or were they just the pawns of some “historical tendency,” directed by European colonialists?

The whiteness scholar Matthew Frye Jacobson, contrary to the previously mentioned authors, does not think of Zionism as a “white” movement, because he takes whiteness to be the opposite of a separate Jewish identity (which, interestingly enough, he equates with “racialism”), at least until the end of the Second World War. Nevertheless, he maintains that Israel is essentially white, as he seems to detect a historical transformation, which came about due to geopolitical reasons linked to the international standing of the United States and perhaps the change in the status of American Jewry: “[. . .]

if racialism had historically been an important component of Zionism, the establishment of a Jewish state ultimately had the opposite effect of whitening the Jews in cultural representations of all sorts: America's client state in the Middle East became, of ideological necessity and by the imperatives of American nationalism, a white client state.³⁵ To be sure, this exclusive binary opposition between "racialism" and "whiteness" in the characterization of Zionism, where both terms are negative, poses further delicate questions that the author does not address.

As the law scholar David Schraub has put it: "Discourses of White power and privilege—valid as far as they go—acted as a sort of accelerant for prejudiced tropes of Jewish power and privilege. The whiteness of the Jewish figure served to cleanse, even validate, arguments that otherwise would reek in their antisemitic familiarity."³⁶ Therefore, when Jews are completely and unequivocally subsumed under the category of "whiteness," it certainly evokes many features of antisemitic discourse. Furthermore, as the colonial features of Zionism and Israel are at the same time taken to be Jewish features of whitened Jews (white dominators, pursuing Western colonialism and mystifying the world concerning their deeds, relying on Holocaust memory for impunity), the characteristics of the discourse analyzed above point to the linkage and potential common ground between antizionism and antisemitism. The tropes of *Jews as Western, white, privileged, powerful oppressors—hark back to antisemitic imagery, where it is the "white" adjective as an operator that makes the only difference, by supposedly rendering this discourse anti-hegemonic.*³⁷

It seems that Piterberg, Jacobson, and Bakan either do not actually engage in empirical research, or, if they do somehow, they still maintain a "theoretical" focus on questions of racism and whiteness in relationship to Jews and Israel. But, in fact, their supposedly scientific procedure is hardly more than the manipulation of certain stereotypes and the articulation of a priori normative judgments.

5. SETTLER COLONIAL STUDIES AND ISRAEL

In contrast to the previous approaches, "settler colonial studies" is meant to be an empirical endeavor to understand the colonial issue, operating with large-scale comparisons; furthermore, it is also conceived as a separate academic discipline, "seeking to explore the dynamics of settler domination and indigenous subjugation in various contexts, most commonly Australia, Canada, the United States and New Zealand."³⁸

Works under this heading are supposedly built on historical findings, while their characteristic activist agenda and theoretical and political overdetermination are less evident at first sight. However, on closer examination, it becomes clear that these overdeterminations equally characterize these more "historical" disciplines, which make them just as questionable as the previous types. In all of the cases the accusation is made to prevail to the detriment of interpretation, therefore the analysis falls back on the manipulation of concepts ("whiteness," "colony," "genocide," "apartheid," etc.) and their manifold combinations, which become "persuasive definitions," thereby posing the "Jewish question" in the above-described manner.

The settler colonial research program is founded upon the distinction perceived as fundamental between colonialism (or "metropole colonialism") and settler colonialism, or rather, on a veritable paradigm shift, from the former to the latter, which, according to its adepts, would amount to a veritable "theoretical revolution." "The former is organized around a logic of exploitation while the latter is characterized by a logic of elimination. In contrast to the colonizer who seeks the labour of the colonized, the settler colonizer instead seeks their land, with the elimination of *the native, while the settler attempts to replace them.*"³⁹ It is said that this paradigm shift, striving to redefine some basic concepts linked to colonialism, would make possible the inclusion of Israel (as a seemingly unlikely candidate) among the countries mentioned.

This willed radical change is clearly expressed by Lorenzo Veracini, one of the founders of the “settler colonial” paradigm. According to him, the task of this latter is “the discursive overturning of presumed power relations.” Israel seemed to be an outlier as long as the concept of “colony” could not be applied to it in a credible manner. In fact, it had so many features that could not be handled by the paradigmatic concept of Western “metropole” colonialism: no mother country, no exploitation of local, indigenous work force, no appropriation of land by force, etc. In contrast, now it can be classified under the heading of “settler colonialism.” As Piterberg has put it: “It is within the typology of settler colonialisms that I place the Zionist colonization of Palestine and the state of Israel—a move which surely should have put to rest the tedious contention that Zionism could not be termed a colonial venture because it lacked the features of metropole colonialism; as if anyone were suggesting otherwise. What its apologists fail to confront is the settler-colonial paradigm.”⁴⁰ However, it seems that the inclusion of Israel among the “settler colonial” states is also conceptually (and much less empirically) directed, first, by the manipulation of the usual binary oppositions: native-settler, indigenous—European colonists, oppressor—oppressed; second, by the conceptual association of settler colonialism (or the act of settlement) with a so-called fundamental intention of the “elimination of the native” comprising ethnic cleansing, murder, and even genocide; and, third, by seemingly empirical comparisons to other settler colonies—which are at best superficial and far-fetched, and at worst totally factitious.

Veracini, in his “empirical” endeavors, such as his book entitled *Israel and Settler Society*, compares Israel to apartheid South Africa, French Algeria, and Australia. Obviously, differences between Israel and these “classical” colonies abound, and Veracini does not even hide those, only treats them as unessential; however, he is keen on preserving the “structure” of the colonial situation, which, according to him,

always remains the same in the form of the opposition between the settlers and the natives. Therefore, he asserts for example that the fact that Israeli Arabs have political representation does not mean much, for in apartheid South Africa the Black population also had some kind of political representation (although he refrains from describing this latter, as it would turn out that the two situations have nothing in common). Also, he talks about “recurring calls” for the transfer of Palestinians and proposals for withdrawing their citizenship, without mentioning that those come from Israeli extremist politicians and fringe political opinion that never gained traction (even so in the actual situation of the Gaza war). In a programmatic introduction to one of the special issues on Israel of the academic journal *Settler Colonial Studies* founded by Veracini, this notion of an essential “structure” of colonization is reaffirmed: “Viewed through the lens of settler colonialism, the *Nakba* in 1948 is not simply a precondition for the creation of Israel or the outcome of early Zionist ambitions; the *Nakba* is not a singular event but is manifested today in the continuing subjection of Palestinians by Israelis.”⁴¹

Also, in his presentation of the Israeli case, Veracini accentuates that the struggle is not between competitive nationalisms, but between the conqueror, on the one hand, and the conquered, the displaced, the occupied, on the other.⁴² The article in *Settler Colonial Studies* cited above also clearly states that research should be motivated by the need for political action, as a clear example of “activism” in the above-mentioned sense:

In order to move forward and create a transformative, liberatory research agenda, it is necessary to analyse Zionism’s structural continuities and the ideology that informs Israeli policies and practices in Israel and toward Palestinians everywhere. In other words, while Israel’s tactics have often been described as settler colonial, the settler colonial structure underpinning them must be a central object of analysis.⁴³

However, one can only talk about decolonization with regard to a colony, therefore a “liberatory research agenda” that already presupposes (without demonstrating) Israel’s colonial nature, amounts to a perfect case of circular argument (where, furthermore, the use of “structure” is conceptually abusive, as it only means “essence”). But obviously, it turns out that the treatment of Israel as a “settler colony” is much more a political than a scientific issue, as conceptual over-determination (binary oppositions, the essentialized conception of the “elimination of the native,” arbitrary or pseudo-empirical attribution of colonial features) is stemming from an ideological agenda.

It is another eminent figure of the paradigm, Patrick Wolfe, who coined the term “structural genocide” in order to qualify the “substance” of settler colonial practices, and to broaden their theoretical and even moral significance. As he puts it: “I suggest that the term ‘structural genocide’ avoids the questions of degree—and, therefore, of hierarchy among victims—that are entailed in qualified genocides, while retaining settler colonialism’s structural induration.”⁴⁴ “Structural genocide,” besides mass killing, comprises population transfer, but also assimilation. For Wolfe, these all point to the replacement of the native by the colonizer, so no meaningful distinction should be made between them. *Furthermore, he also talks about “genocide in abeyance,” which means that even when there is no actual genocidal practice, the potentiality always remains: No empirical evidence could dispute the potentiality (which is assumed to be equivalent to the reality) of “genocide” defined in this exceedingly flexible yet essentialized fashion.*⁴⁵ Thus Wolfe is relativizing genocide (a concept established in reaction to the Holocaust) while also exploiting the tremendous imagery connected with it and utilizing it against Israel. (To not to say that this is Holocaust relativization, instrumentalization, and reversal in one swoop.)

The “post-Zionist” Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, following in the footsteps of Veracini and Wolfe, has also become an adept of this

“structural” view. According to him, the whole history of Zionism from its beginnings, regardless of conflicts, internal strife and wars waged should be viewed as a unitary colonial project. The process of creation of the State of Israel up until 1948 and the territories acquired in 1967 obeyed the same logic, both being products of the same underlying “structure.” For example: “The Zionist project can be best described as a cumulative, colonial enterprise that has continued unabated since its inception.”⁴⁶ Or: “This is colonisation, I suggest, although it sounds like an anachronistic term in the 21st century, I think we should understand that Israel is colonising Palestine. It started colonising it in the late 19th century and is still colonising it today.”⁴⁷

If Israel cannot be interpreted in the colonial framework, then the obvious danger is that it becomes a “normal” country just like any other, and the basis of radical criticism formulated with the help of hollowed out concepts becoming emotive “persuasive definitions” slips away. Now, that the interpretation has been renewed, thanks to the novel concept of “settler colonialism,” the political and critical force of the concept has, supposedly, also been preserved or restored: it has also initiated something like a symbolic revolution – and the reaction of the researchers is more than enthusiastic. At long last, Israel can be blamed and criticized in a “justified” manner, supported by the credentials of an allegedly genuine scientific investigation.

CONCLUSION

In the academic literature examined, what is at stake is not so much to demonstrate the colonial nature of Israel by conducting new empirical research; rather, it is to come up with a conceptual change (at times alluded to as “paradigm shift”), from “(metropole) colony” to “settler colony” and further adapt the concept in order to be able to subsume Israel under it, normally an unlikely candidate to be criticized for colonialism. Other conceptions use the framework

of “whiteness,” constructing the European and the Israeli Jewish populations as dominators and oppressors, who collectively harbor racist attitudes against the Palestinians, directly informing their actions. The frameworks of “whiteness” and “colonialism” frequently overlap, thereby strengthening each other and reinforcing this peculiar, conceptually guided criticism. The features associated with “white” Israeli colonialism are conquest, racism, elimination of the natives, and even genocide. As it has been noted already, the qualification of Israel as a “colony” on the interpretative level automatically renders it illegitimate on the normative-political level. Furthermore, it is apparent most of the time that the interpreters’ goal is outright political or “activist”: to delegitimize Israel and Zionism by this qualification.

The beliefs associated with Israel in this framework are the following: that Israel’s colonialism is unitary, without regard to the situation before and after 1967; that Zionism is the continuation of European, white, Western colonialism; that Jews are a non-autochthonous, foreign population without a legitimate genealogy, therefore without legitimate claim to the territory; that Zionists have had the explicit intention of eliminating the native Palestinians by ethnic cleansing, and even genocide. Authors working in the colonial or settler-colonial paradigm pretend neither to give an exhaustive definition, nor a “proof” of Israel’s colonial nature; this is why they have recourse to analogies and vague comparisons. They recourse to an essentially “deductive,” concept-laden, and even conceptually overdetermined approach, with minimal or no empirical input, striving to elaborate a category that could fit the very

uncommon case of Israel, as they take the cognitive-political stakes to be high.

For all these reasons, the problematic to be examined by researchers of antisemitism is not how a particular antizionist stance inadvertently or unintentionally poses the “Jewish question” or even may slip into antisemitism due to rhetorical or symbolic exaggeration; neither should the goal be to prove that antizionism and antisemitism are essentially the same by way of getting into rhetorical or semantic arguments. Their relationship is not to be taken as semantic or even pragmatic; on the contrary, it has to be established that they are not only susceptible to assuming similarities, but that they may even emerge from a common ground.⁴⁸

One of the main reasons why antizionism has become the most widely shared and cherished critical idiom on today’s left, is that Jews are perceived as white colonizers. Criticism of Israel feeds on criticism of Jews as inchoately “white.” Therefore, it would be too simplistic and even incorrect to assert that “antizionism is just antisemitism in another form.” There is no pretense here, nor is there a need for one, because the condemnation of Jews as whites is obvious and openly stated on the side that erroneously calls itself “progressive.” The connection between criticism of Jews and that of Israel is not metonymic, but structural: it is founded on the allegation of whiteness and coloniality—which shows the importance of analyzing the “white” and the “colonial” signifier together. Therefore, it is the problematization of Jews and their ascribed characteristics, the posing of the “Jewish question,” which, with the help of the “white” signifier, qualifies Israel as colonial, and singles it out for attack.

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