

Reflections on Patrick Wolfe

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I did not know Patrick Wolfe nearly as well as I would have liked. Continental drift meant that our paths crossed primarily at the annual meetings of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, where he was a generous, lively and well-respected figure. Our email communications – I now see, with the clarity of retrospection – were far too occasional, and far too utilitarian. In our last exchanges – mostly about blurbing what turned out to be his final efforts (*Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* and the edited collection *The Settler Complex: Recuperating Binarianism in Colonial Studies*), Patrick also wrote of a recent visit to Israel, of having a gun pointed at his stomach, and of finding time during my upcoming visit to Australia to travel to the mountains. He was a bold and courageous thinker, traveller and scholar. Patrick was, in my experience, a thoughtful provocateur with a hearty politics, but also a man with the ability to laugh heartily, to greet a stranger, and to maintain a twinkle in his eye. He did all these things when I first met him – including the provocation – and it proved a joyful intellectual experience.

Patrick offered many North American scholars a first introduction to the concept of settler colonialism. He arrived among us bearing gifts: articles and books that told us that settler colonialism was a distinct category all its own; that it was not an event but a structure; that it carried within it a logic of elimination that crossed political, legal, economic, social and cultural categories.

These gifts arrived at a critical moment in American Indian history. The field had rejected longstanding synthetic organising strategies built around political history – which privileged the policy and law of the federal government (over Indian people) – and cultural history – which focused on non-Indian

ideological imaginaries and their material consequences. Scholars had turned to a productive brand of American Indian social history, built in the tradition of the 'bottom up' social history that emerged from the 1960s, but which focused on Indian communities, issues of accountability, agency and self-determination. We built methodological toolkits informed by ethnohistory, oral history and tribal epistemologies. Powerful and important pieces of work, these studies nonetheless failed to offer analytical and synthetic frameworks for making sense of – and continuing to build – American Indian studies as a diverse, but also coherent field.

In that moment, to think 'settler colonialism' was to hit 'refresh' on your browser. It sent a pulsing wave through the field, engendered new debates, offered new synthetic ways of thinking. 'Settler' became the adjective of choice; one barely needed to say the word 'colonialism'. We all knew what it entailed and what it meant: critique, politics, analytical power, and most importantly, intellectual liveliness. It was a joy and an honour to cross paths with Patrick Wolfe at a conference. And I think it important to reaffirm the weight, importance and respect accorded his work in the broader context of indigenous studies in North America.

In the end, I ended up writing a blurb not for the large manuscript, *Traces of History*, but for the edited collection, *The Settler Complex*. Patrick's introductory essay to that volume makes his own intellectual integrity crystal clear. In a powerful analytical defence of the binarism that (he argues) distinguishes the indigenous from the settler society, Patrick engages the many complicating factors that have been the hallmark of the intellectual conversations surrounding settler colonial theory. Drawing on *Traces of History*, he takes on the question of race, drawing out of comparative analysis both complication and clarity. Situating a Gramscian analysis within the context of settler-indigenous binaries, he seeks to address the question of indigenous agency, particularly in relation to forms of violence that are simultaneously premises, promises and omni-presents. Recognising both the limits and the inevitability of indigenous agency, Patrick addresses in sophisticated terms that particular line of critique. As impressive, in that book, he wove together into a cogent whole a series of quite distinct essays, recapitulating in the form of the collection the power that his own theoretical assertions had for the field as a whole. Patrick Wolfe occupied a critical place in American Indian Studies and in global, comparative and connective forms of Indigenous Studies. He will be missed: personally, by the many friends and interlocutors he developed over the years; and intellectually, by all of us who have been, and will continue to be, pushed, bolstered, provoked, and inspired by his thought and scholarship.

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