

Patrick Wolfe's dialectics

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Patrick Wolfe's *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* appeared in 1998. Wolfe's provocation was to look for settler colonialism in the ongoing subjection of indigenous peoples in settler societies. The contemporary settler polities, he later argued, have been 'impervious to regime change'.¹ It was an Australian-produced response to the consolidation and global spread of postcolonial studies as discourse and method (quite interestingly, postcolonial studies had also originally been an Australian intellectual export). Wolfe's call became very influential and inspired the consolidation of settler colonial studies as a distinct scholarly field. This tribute focuses on his method and influence.

Patrick Wolfe was an unusual scholar. Always somewhat at the margins of Australian academia and yet holding at different times fellowships at Harvard and Stanford, he was able to contribute seminally to a variety of fields: anthropology, genocide studies, the historiography of race, indigenous studies, and the study of colonialism and imperialism. He was educated in the best English schools and was successful in the United States. The 'cringe' still fundamentally shapes many aspects of Australian cultural life but he remained marginal; the cringe did not apply.

He was my teacher, even if never in a formal capacity, but we had significant differences in approach. These differences have been neglected in criticism of settler colonial studies as a scholarly endeavour. We have been lumped together – and it was a great privilege. I'll get to some of these critiques in a minute, but let me focus on our differences. Basically, in my thinking, settler colonialism was like a waltz, a three-step dance involving settlers, indigenous

1 Wolfe, 2006: 402.

peoples and exogenous others; for him it was like a salsa involving indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. Two is not three, and even though this sounds like a diatribe medieval theology scholars may engage in, it was not a small difference.² He regarded all non-indigenous peoples as ‘settlers’ and I do not. And there was another fundamental point of dissension: for him settler colonialism was a type of colonialism, for me they were antithetical modes of domination. One is not two – the medieval scholasticists again. Our focus was also dissimilar: my interest is settlers and what they do and what they think they are doing. For him, the focus was indigeneity under attack. He had promised that he would respond.³ I will not enjoy that even greater privilege.

He typically proceeded against fashionable scholarly trends. Dialectics and binaries had ceased to be familiar methodological approaches in scholarly pursuits decades before, but they still worked for him. And they worked for those who read his work, and they were many. Similarly, area specialisation was not his call. Reframing stubborn problems actually required him to think outside established disciplinary boundaries. As a result, as well as interdisciplinary, his work was eminently and inherently comparative. He was able to contribute to educating a generation of younger scholars working in a remarkable variety of national settings: Australia, Hawaii, North America, Brazil and Palestine.

This was his dialectical method: anything could be better understood by looking at what it wasn’t. He believed that the rigorous analysis of a specific topic could shed light on another, that one could understand the racialisation of African Americans in the United States by looking at the dispossession of indigenous peoples; that one could understand the current dehumanisation of Indigenous Australians by looking at the ways in which a nascent scholarly discipline had at once proclaimed their humanity while reflecting on their alleged failure to reproduce. He set aside the self-reflecting and self-centred gaze of identity politics and ethnic and minority studies.

2 He noted: ‘the “Natives” irreducible externality to the settler social contract ... prompts me to register an appreciative disagreement with Veracini, who has aptly pointed out – my disagreement being with his inference rather than with the point itself – that settlers bring their sovereignty with them. This enables Veracini to distinguish between settlers and immigrants, the latter being those who do not bring a sovereignty with them. On its own terms, this distinction seems questionable (where, for instance, does it leave White settlers of Irish descent?)’. In a note he then added: ‘My disagreement is not with Veracini’s observation that, while settlers found political orders, immigrants encounter those orders already founded. It is with the implication that this distinction within sovereignty discourse detaches immigrants from the settler project of Native replacement, an implication that ultimately (or so it seems to me) hinges on voluntarism.’ Wolfe 2013: 258, 276, n. 11.

3 ‘I am saving my disagreement with Lorenzo over his next line – “This is why settler colonialism is not colonialism” – for another time. This article is long enough as it is’. See Wolfe 2012: 163, n. 7.

This feeling was reciprocated. The burgeoning field of Black studies, for example, has had little time for him – although there are exceptions to this non-engagement. Aziz Rana, for example, followed Patrick's lead and looked at the ways in which settler conceptions of 'freedom' shaped policy with regards to *variously* racialised alterities and emphasised the binary nature of settler constituent practice.⁴ More recently, Jared Sexton offered a critical response to the consolidation of indigenous and settler colonial studies.⁵ Sexton is concerned with the ways settler colonial studies and native studies neglect slavery as a problem as much as they neglect 'abolition' in their approaches to settler decolonisation.⁶ For native studies, Sexton summarises, 'anti-racism without indigenous leadership is a wager for black junior partnership in the settler colonial state'.⁷ He dismisses this placing: there are ways out of settler colonialism other than being indigenous (or an 'ally').⁸ 'Abolition' (understood flexibly and in an expanded way) will liberate all because abolition is not about indigenous sovereignty as opposed to the settler one, but against sovereignty *per se*. Indigenous and settler peoples may be the 'peoples of sovereignty', Sexton argues, but it is genocide that unites radically different experiences. Genocide is inherent to slavery: enslavement is the prohibition of enslaved to reproduce '*as people*'.⁹ Slavery is prior to indigenous dispossession, it is an *Ur* dispossession, the mother of all dispossessions: 'Slavery is not a loss that the [indigenous] self experiences – of language, lineage, land, or labor – but rather the loss of any self that could experience such loss.'¹⁰ I imagine that this criticism would have prompted Patrick to offer a reply. He would not respond to criticism that misrepresented his work, he did not defend straw men that bore his name, but he was keenly aware of the strategic uses his scholarship could be made to work for.

I once told Patrick that his work on racialisations (note the plural) was recuperating a line of inquiry that was last seen with Colette Guillaumin's work in the early 1970s. He took it as a compliment and added her to his notes.¹¹ Guillaumin had seminally distinguished between 'hetero-referential racialisation' (i.e. 'they are black and therefore we are white'; we are therefore defined as *not them*) and 'auto-referential racialisation' (i.e. 'we are human and

4 Rana 2010.

5 Sexton 2014: 1–15.

6 Sexton 2014: 2.

7 Sexton 2014: 5.

8 See Sexton 2014: 7.

9 Sexton 2014: 9 (emphasis in original).

10 Sexton 2014.

11 Wolfe 2006: 404, n. 2.

therefore they are not'), even though she had emphasised, as Patrick would, that different ways of constructing racialised alterities are always interwoven and very rarely operate in their 'pure' form.¹²

Comparisons in a register of difference and the theoretical implications of this work were central to Patrick's approach. He was suspicious of postcolonial discourse and its embrace of 'hybridity' and its assertion of a putative discontinuity with the colonial past. His rejection paralleled that of Peter Gran and preceded that of Haim Hazan.¹³ Patrick's recuperation of 'binaries' preceded Kieran Healy's parallel rejection of 'nuance'.¹⁴ In a paper now forthcoming in a most prestigious sociological journal, Healy concludes that 'demanding more nuance typically obstructs the development of theory that is intellectually interesting, empirically generative, or practically successful', and notes:

Connoisseurs call for the contemplation of complexity almost for its own sake, or remind everyone that things are subtler than they seem. The attractive thing about this move is that it is literally always available to the person who wants to make it. Theory is founded on abstraction, abstraction means throwing away detail for the sake of a bit of generality, and so things in the world are always 'more complicated than that' – for any value of 'that'.¹⁵

Patrick was never constrained by nuance. He would have approved.

In recent years, and largely following Patrick's prompt, settler colonial studies consolidated into an autonomous comparative scholarly subfield. The scholarly journal of the same name and the emerging literatures that Edward Cavanagh and I have monitored since 2010 are a testament to this strengthening.¹⁶ Possibly an indication of its relative success, settler colonial studies as interpretative framework has more recently been the object of sustained critique. This criticism was not coordinated and emerged from quite different scholarly settings. It should be taken seriously. Some straw men here, but not all straw men.

I'd like to focus on two examples. In a brief note published in the October 2015 issue of *Perspectives on History*, the professional magazine of the American Historical Association, Nancy Shoemaker has reminded us that settler colonialism

12 See Guillaumin 1972: 247–74. As a rule of thumb, a colonial world would prefer the first type while a settler colonial world would opt for the second. Auto-referential racialisation (i.e. what Leon Poliakov described as 'Arianization') fits in with settler colonialism's logic of elimination. On the contrary, hetero-referential racialisation (i.e. what Gayatri Spivak describes as 'Othering') works better within the colonial necessities of exploitation. Can this distinction be condensed in the opposition between an imperial form of whiteness and a republican form of whiteness? See Poliakov 1974; Spivak 1985: 252–57.

13 Gran 2004; Hazan 2015.

14 Healy forthcoming.

15 Healy forthcoming: 1–8.

16 See *Settler Colonial Studies* (www.tandfonline.com/toc/rset20/; accessed: 23 December 2014), and 'Settler colonial studies blog' (settlercolonialstudies.org/; accessed 23 December 2014). The blog has alerted its followers to more than 1,500 scholarly works dedicated to various aspects of settler colonialism.

is only one among many types of colonialism (she identified 12 types). What prompted her reassertion, Shoemaker noted, was that 'settler colonial theory has taken over ... Native American studies', and that 'settler colonial theory is now dogma'.¹⁷ While the content of this reaction is incontrovertible (there are many colonialisms, and yet this was never contradicted in the first place), the context where this is stated is telling: settler colonial studies is forcing a redefinition of established disciplinary boundaries. Similarly, Kēhaulani Kauanui, who has worked closely with Patrick, also distinguishes between what Patrick actually said from the way his work is used. It is too often asserted: settler colonial studies and its rapid consolidation can obliterate indigenous presences. She concludes: 'Settler Colonial Studies does not, should not, and cannot replace Indigenous Studies'.¹⁸ To 'exclusively focus on the settler colonial without any meaningful engagement with the indigenous – as has been the case in how Wolfe's work has been cited', she noted, 'can (re)produce another form of "elimination of the native"'.¹⁹

If Shoemaker was concerned with the ways in which 'settler colonial theory' compromised the position of Native American studies within the historical discipline (but note: this theory should not be characterised as 'settler colonial', rather it is critical of the mode of domination that it explores), Kauanui was concerned with the ways in which the reception of Patrick's work and its routine embrace was compromising the position of 'indigenous studies' within American studies. Kauanui referred to a paper by Alyosha Goldstein presented at a panel during the 2015 annual meeting of the American Studies Association (ASA) tellingly entitled 'The Settler Colonialism Analytic: A Critical Reappraisal'. Goldstein criticised the ways in which Wolfe's project had been reduced to the 'structure, not the event' quip. She also cited Robert Warrior's unease: 'I had a growing anxiety, however ... that the rise of Settler Colonial Studies has become – not everywhere by any means, but in some circles – an answer to the chronic need for more attention to and awareness of Native and Indigenous studies', an attention and awareness that, Warrior felt, should be fulfilled by native and indigenous studies themselves.²⁰ Kauanui, however, took care in not blaming Patrick for his followers' excesses.

Yet again, Shoemaker's search for primacy, with imperial and colonial histories holding on to subordinate fields, is perhaps as unwarranted as Sexton's search for priority. Settler colonial studies never suggested that colonialism did not shape the world we live in, and the two dispossessions could profitably be thought as simultaneous. They may ultimately be co-dependent. Besides, settler

17 Shoemaker 2015.

18 Kauanui 2016.

19 Kauanui 2016.

20 Kauanui 2016.

and indigenous peoples are the 'peoples of sovereignty' only in the sense that one's sovereignty is asserted as the other is denied. One could by the same logic respond that white and black folks are the peoples of embodied property, whereby one's ability to own bodies is asserted precisely because someone else's is denied. Catherine Kellogg's recent reading of Judith Butler and Catherine Malabou's exchange regarding Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* compellingly suggests that dispossession is necessarily and dialectically structured into two valences.²¹ Patrick would have recognised his seminal input.

Criticism aside, Patrick's work is truly reshaping scholarly boundaries, especially in the United States. The role of Patrick's work in redefining American studies as a discipline was discussed at a roundtable scheduled for the 2016 meeting of the ASA, a conference dedicated to the theme of 'home'. The rationale for the roundtable is telling:

A central contention of *Traces of History* [Patrick's latest book] is that racialization 'represents a response to the crisis occasioned when colonisers are threatened with the requirement to share social space with the colonized'.²² The implication of this argument – that race and space are inextricable, and that racialisation results from colonizers being confronted with the threat of having to share social space with the colonized – leads to the proposition that race distinguishes those who belong in the national home from those who are deemed out of place in it. ... On this roundtable, scholars consider contributions *Traces of History* makes, including the challenges it poses and the possibilities it opens to American studies and its approaches to home. Panelists approach the discussion of Wolfe's book as experts in one or more of the racial discourses and histories it takes up, and from different disciplinary homes. As they do so, they explore how and why the study of sites of settler colonialism have and have not found a home in American Studies. Of particular interest will be how the book provokes a rethinking of erasure narratives that have characterized historical writing in what became the US. They also consider ways a comparative approach – their own, in dialogue with the one Wolfe takes in *Traces of History* – can enable new and necessary understandings of the articulations among racisms as they take place in disparate sites that are linked through circuits of imperialism. Interrogating how *Traces of History* is and is not at home in American Studies, in other words, offers an opportunity to take up larger questions about the future of American studies.²³

The scheduled roundtable is studded with international 'stars'. Possibly culminating this work of collective appraisal, an international conference dedicated entirely to Patrick's work will be held in March 2017 at UCLA. The call for papers is also telling:

21 Kellogg 2016.

22 Wolfe 2016: 14.

23 ASA Program Committee n.d.

The similarities that connect the histories and displacements of indigenous populations from Hawaii and Australia to North America, South Africa and Brazil, are rarely connected to broader questions of race. Yet interdisciplinary study of indigenous peoples in the context of settler colonialism has given rise to important new scholarship on the operation of race as a conceptual category and as a structure of subordination. Seminal insights in this area were developed by the Australian scholar Patrick Wolfe (1949–2016), to whose memory the conference is dedicated ... Drawing the distinction between colonialism and settler colonialism, Wolfe launched a rich field of inquiry, enabling researchers to develop new paradigms for the study of race that contribute to political theory, constitutional theory, historical understanding and new ethnographies of indigeneity. His untimely passing has created a moment to bring these many strands of inquiry into conversation.²⁴

Patrick once confessed to me that he was a ‘still a Marxist’. I would take it as a compliment but was surprised. I knew he had read Marx, of course, but I had grown up with very, very different Marxists and he did not quite fit the bill. I’d like to suggest he was a Marxist especially because of his scholarship and methodology. The referent here was perhaps the young Marx: someone digesting the best that Hegelian traditions could offer and discovering that things are not things in and of themselves but through relationships. In a sense, he was a Marxian. Dialectical materialism was his method, and he wrote a book about settler colonialism by looking at anthropology (and vice versa), and another about the racial formation that follows the emancipation of slaves by looking at its opposite: indigenous assimilation.

A parenthesis on what I mean here for ‘dialectics’ is perhaps needed. Let me refer to another teacher of mine, Carlo Ginzburg. He once noted that the ‘human species tends to represent reality in terms of opposites. The flow of perceptions, in other words, is scanned on the basis of markedly opposing categories: light and dark, hot and cold – high and low’. He referred to Heraclitus’s motto, ‘that reality is a War of opposites – a motto that Hegel retranslated in terms of their dialectical conception’ to emphasise how dialectics is essential not to construe reality but to perceive it.²⁵ So dialectics is needed not to express the way things ‘actually’ are, but to make them understandable. The reason we may think dialectically is not metaphysical. We think dialectically because of perception, because of aesthetics, and dialectics is needed primarily for heuristical purposes. It is here that I would like to base my claim that Patrick was a great teacher.

²⁴ Pers. comm., 4 August 2016.

²⁵ Ginzburg 1986: 109 (my translation).

There are scholars that imagine their interlocutors in a Machiavellian way, and there are scholars that imagine them in a Socratic way. They are either informing the prince or their students (there are many other possible approaches, of course). Patrick always had a Socratic approach, he was never Machiavellian; that is also why he was at times criticised for not proposing explicitly *political* solutions.²⁶

Let me focus again on his books and his dialectics (even though it was in the shorter essay that he was in my opinion at his best). *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* was ostensibly a history of Australian anthropology. He once told me that the reference to 'settler colonialism' in the title was only added at the very end and at the request of the publisher. As far as he was concerned, when he wrote it, settler colonialism as a mode of domination was not the main focus. And yet, to explain the evolution of this academic field Patrick defined settler colonialism as a distinct mode of domination. No one had theorised it before and in a systematic way. It was his ability to understand settler colonialism that enabled him to frame the provenance and evolution of anthropology; it was his knowledge of the ways in which anthropologists were embedded in a particular mode of domination that enabled him to conceptualise settler colonialism. Similarly, *Traces of History*, which appeared earlier this year, utilises his analysis of racism under settler colonialism in order to explain racism everywhere else (and vice versa). That such an explanation actually provides a compelling typology of racial formations is an added bonus. The definition of settler colonialism and the typology of racial formation are heuristically compelling and were not even the main point. Or were they?

He was my teacher but he was also my friend. Patrick taught me how to make sure a fire shelter is OK. I mentioned how removed he was from Australian academia. But he wasn't removed from the community he lived in. The Coranderrk Aboriginal community were his neighbours. He was a victim of the 2009 bushfires. In succeeding months we visited often and my eldest daughter was the first one to dance on top of the cement watertank he had built in front of what would become his new house. New building regulations demanded that a wider clearing be opened before rebuilding. So we worked to clear the land. I worked at settler colonialism with him as well as on it. I say all this not to claim privileged access in interpreting his work, but because I would like to emphasise how Patrick's scholarship was especially grounded. He was unconcerned with departmental squabbles, metrics, rankings, measurable impacts, and ERA eligible outputs. He took my daughters to rustle water from loggers. I would like

26 See Rowse 2014: 297–310.

to think of him as what once would have been called an 'organic intellectual'. This still is a compliment; these days if you want to sell anything wholesome it must be 'organic'. He was staunchly organic to his community if not his class in a way that was indeed revolutionary. This included an ongoing recognition of the importance of emotions. After losing his house, in a letter that was widely syndicated in the Australian press, he had noted:

My house was on 4.8 hectares of bush outside Healesville, above Chum Creek. It went up in flames on Saturday. There's nothing left but some unusable steel framing and a cracked concrete slab. Friends, neighbours, family, colleagues, strangers have all been wonderful. Alongside the sadness and the not knowing what's going to happen, their humanity has been truly uplifting.

I wasn't impressed to see the Prime Minister cuddling a crying man on camera. If he'd come across me while I was crying, I would have resisted his embrace, especially if the media had been present.

I don't need a public show of empathy from the Prime Minister. I need him to do something meaningful about climate change so that fewer of us will have to lose our houses, our animals and each other.²⁷

His scholarship was adopted globally but it was irreducibly Australian. It was conceived in relation to Australian developments. Whether it is overcited or not, Patrick's work is famous principally for two statements: one was about the 'structure', the other about the 'logic' of settler colonialism.²⁸ But attention to the specific context in which these statements were developed is necessary. That 'settler invasion is a structure, not an event', should be contextualised in the 1990s: the 'Age of Mabo'.²⁹ Similarly, his contention that settler colonialism is driven by a 'logic of elimination' should be contextualised in the 2000s: the age of forced 'normalisation' (the age that would see the Northern Territory 'intervention' and ATSIC's executive dissolution). The former was a warning against what Elizabeth Povinelli would call the 'cunning of recognition', the latter a warning against a type of normalisation that resembled forced assimilation.³⁰ Crime fiction novelist Catherine Aird said that if 'you can't be a good example, then you'll just have to be a horrible warning'.³¹ Patrick focused on crimes that were not fictional and issued two exemplary warnings instead.

He was somewhat removed from academia but never out of touch with the world that surrounded him. And yet, the 'structure' and the 'logic' are somewhat incompatible: one identifies permanence, the other supersession. Some have

27 Wolfe 2009.

28 Wolfe 1999: 163, 2006: 387.

29 See Attwood 1996.

30 Povinelli 2002.

31 Quoted in Kleiser 2005: 95.

recognised a focus shift between these approaches,³² but I'd like to emphasise methodological continuity. Writing in 1990s Australia, when following Mabo and the Native Title Act many felt a new beginning was possible, he warned against settler appropriations of indigenous struggles. Writing in the mid-2000s, he insisted on the need to prioritise resistance. There is no contradiction here and the two stances are merely two sides of the same coin. The times had changed.

He was planning to work on territorialisation and I was able to read an early draft of his next project. I suspect that he would have relied on his analysis of the ways in which settlers organise their relationship with the land to understand the ways in which other collectives do the same. Understanding settler colonialism as a mode of domination was in his scholarship always an accessory for something else, a means to some other end, one way of understanding a relationship. Like the British, who had supposedly set up an empire without really wanting to, this committed anti-imperialist scholar kickstarted a scholarly field in a fit of absentmindedness. Or did he?

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