



## Understanding Colonialism and Settler Colonialism as Distinct Formations

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# UNDERSTANDING COLONIALISM AND SETTLER COLONIALISM AS DISTINCT FORMATIONS

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**Colonialism**

**culture  
techniques**

**decolonization**

**settler  
colonialism**

*A growing body of literature has characterized settler colonial phenomena as ‘distinct’, and called for the establishment of dedicated interpretative tools. ‘Distinct’, however, begs the question: distinct relative to what? This essay reflects on this distinctiveness, and heuristically suggests that reference to the diverse operation of viral and bacterial phenomena can help an understanding of the distinct functioning of colonial and settler colonial systems. While both viruses and bacteria are exogenous elements that often dominate their destination locales, viruses need living cells to operate, while bacteria attach to surfaces and may or may not rely on the organisms they encounter. Similarly, while both colonizers and settler colonizers are exogenous elements that assert their dominance over their destination locales, a colonial system of relationships, unlike a settler colonial one, is premised on the presence and subjugation of exploitable ‘Others’. This essay also suggests that this metaphorical conceptualization can facilitate reflection on the decolonization of settler colonial forms.*

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In November 2011 *Science* published a paper presenting research undertaken by a team led by population geneticist Laurent Excoffier of the University of Montreal (Moreau et al. 2011). This work repackaged in a genetics-inflected language a crucial tenet of settler colonial discourse, a point initially suggested by apologists of the ‘settler revolution’ (see Belich 2009), and repeated since by their followers: settler pioneers are inherently better humans – better than the peoples they have left behind and certainly better than the indigenous peoples they would encounter. If this discourse was once framed in racial terms (against indigenous peoples) and in terms of a regenerative experience on the ‘frontier’ or with reference to ‘invigorating’ climates (against those who had not moved there), now it is expressed in terms of a better capacity to shape the genetic pool of current populations:

Since their origin, human populations have colonized the whole planet, but the demographic processes governing range expansions are mostly unknown. We analysed the genealogy of more than 1 million individuals resulting from a range expansion in Quebec between 1686 and 1960 and reconstructed the spatial dynamics of the expansion. We find that a majority of the present Saguenay Lac Saint-Jean population can be traced back to ancestors having lived directly on or close to the wave front. Ancestors located on the front contributed significantly more to the current gene pool than those from the range core, likely due to a 20 per cent larger effective fertility of women on the wave front. This fitness component is heritable on the wave front and not in the core, implying that this life-history trait evolves during range expansions. (Moreau et al. 2011)

These researchers ‘demonstrated’ an ostensible and measurable evolutionary advantage associated with ‘pioneering’. Not only did pioneers have more babies, their babies had more babies, provided they still inhabited ‘unsettled’ environments. A crucial corollary of their work is that an accelerated reproductive capacity is consistent with the reproductive patterns of other species in comparable conditions (Fecht 2011). Unlike weeds, humans are ‘slow growers’, but a change in environment, and specifically a move to an ‘empty’ frontier, can comprehensively transform them. Pioneering produces inheritable traits, these authors claimed; that is, it produces a genetically defined new (and evolutionarily improved) human ‘type’. ‘Professor of the Science of Society in Yale University’ Albert Galloway Keller had noted in 1907 that the ‘many analogies between man’s occupation of a new habitat and what is well known to naturalists concerning the migrations and struggles of plants and animals scarcely need to be pointed out’ (Keller 1907: 5). More than a century later, Excoffier and his team (and indeed *Science*’s referees) seem to have barely moved from this notion.

In reality, despite the name of the prestigious journal in which their work appeared, rather than contributing to ‘science’, Excoffier and his team may

1 This scholarly field has consolidated in the 2000s in the wake of Patrick Wolfe's (1999) book. While reflection on the reasons for the dramatic growth of the study of comparative settler colonialism as a systematic field with its own language, journal and intra-referencing is still underdeveloped, in a forthcoming article I reflect on the nature of this development and on the historiographies that underpin it (Veracini 2013).

2 The link between colonial forms and infection is also influentially made by John A. Hobson. Hobson's *Imperialism* (1902) is presented explicitly as 'a study of social pathology' that does not attempt 'to disguise the malignancy of the disease' and 'proceeds rather by diagnosis than by historical description'. His interest focuses on what he terms 'the economic parasites of Imperialism', and he repeatedly likens the 'moneyed interest within the State' to a 'social parasitic process' that fastens its 'economic suckers into foreign bodies so as to drain them of their wealth' (John A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, London,

have simply reflected on a specific region's relative isolation and chronic lack of economic development, on a consequent absence of further immigration in the area, and on a comprehensive lack of economic and educational opportunities. Were the pioneers who settled elsewhere less 'virile' because further migration diluted their contribution to the genetic pool, or because they actually achieved what they had set out to do in the first place, which was to develop their district rapidly and turn it into a locale as similar as possible to the colonizing cores? After all, disadvantage *is* a trait that is passed on from one generation to the next, even if we probably don't need a team of genetic researchers to grasp this point. What is also remarkable in this work is the absolute disavowal of indigenous presences. It seems important to remind its authors that these locations were *not* at the edge of human settlement: they were at the edge of *European* settlement. In this sense, and it is a quite important sense, the very notion of 'range expansion' their work is premised on disavows indigenous people to the point of questioning their actual humanity. The extraordinary persistence of this discourse is significant in itself, a demonstration of the extraordinary resilience of foundational imaginaries relating to settler colonial endeavours in settler societies. This work, however, also provides an opportunity to reflect similarly on how reference to natural phenomena can help an understanding of colonial and settler colonial formations.

A growing body of literature has characterized settler colonial phenomena as 'distinct', and called for the establishment of dedicated interpretative tools (e.g. Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis 1995; Wolfe 1999; Russell 2001; Pearson 2001; Elkins and Pedersen 2005; Pateman 2007; Goldstein and Lubin 2008; Belich 2009; Ford 2010; Banivanua-Mar and Edmonds 2010; Veracini 2010; Bateman and Pilkington 2011; and *Settler Colonial Studies*, a newly established academic journal; however earlier attempts include Fieldhouse 1966; Denoon 1983; Fredrickson 1988; Shafir 1989).<sup>1</sup> 'Distinct', however, begs the question: distinct relative to what? (see Sovereign 2011). This essay reflects in a necessarily provisional way on this distinctiveness. It heuristically suggests that reference to the diverse operation of viral and bacterial phenomena can help in understanding the distinct functioning of colonial and settler colonial systems.<sup>2</sup> While both viruses and bacteria are exogenous elements that often dominate their destination locales, viruses need living cells to operate, while bacteria attach to surfaces and may or may not rely on the organisms they encounter (for a definition of colonialism as primarily characterized by exogenous domination, see Horvath 1972). Similarly, while both colonizers and settler colonizers are exogenous elements that assert their dominance over their destination locales, a colonial system of relationships, unlike a settler colonial one, is premised on the presence and subjugation of exploitable 'Others' (see Wolfe 1999). This essay also suggests

James Nisbet, 1902, pp. v–vi).

3 A disclaimer is necessary, a sort of intellectual condom to be used for protection. Like when ‘revolution’ is used for regime change: it does not mean that political parities are *like* planets, only that their ascendancy and fall resembles their movement. Likewise, I am suggesting that the different operation of colonial and settler colonial phenomena resembles the

that this metaphorical conceptualization can facilitate reflection on the decolonization of settler colonial forms.

There is, however, a crucial difference between my approach and that of Excoffier and his team. While they understood this comparison literally – they argue that human reproductive patterns are *like* those of other life forms – in my essay reference to natural phenomena as a way to understand human processes is strictly limited to its heuristic potential (for a remarkable example of how this could be done, see Cohen 2009). While I have no particular preference for colonial over settler colonial formations, or for bacteria over viruses (or for other organisms for that matter), I am *not* saying that colonizers and settler colonizers are *like* viruses and bacteria, or that colonialism and settler colonialism should be necessarily understood as diseased conditions. Besides, I am aware of the risk of possibly ‘naturalizing’ colonial and settler colonial processes by likening them to otherwise naturally occurring phenomena. On the contrary, I am comparing separate modalities of operation for the purpose of explanation; the analogy is between two sets of relationships, it is not an analogy between the things themselves.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, I am not positivistically comparing social processes with dynamics characterizing the natural world. Thus, this essay’s intention is to explore the heuristic potential of a metaphorical approach.<sup>4</sup>

### Colonialism as a Viral Form

different operation of viruses and bacteria. The only way to understand this argument as insulting is to misrepresent it. Yet again, if my argument was to be misunderstood on this point, I would probably be having what could be defined as unsafe intellectual intercourse.

4 Special thanks to Kevin Murray of *Southern Perspectives* for raising the question in the first place.

Viruses and imperialism/colonialism are related. Viruses wiped out entire populations in the New World and the Pacific and allowed colonialism and indeed settler colonialism in the first place (e.g. Crosby 1986; Diamond 2005; studies combining epidemiology and colonialism, however, constitute a vast literature; see, for example, Watts 1988; Peckham 2013; Harvard University Library, Open Collections Program 2011). This connection, however, works the other way round as well: disease environments and the ways in which they inevitably shape different colonial formations have also been traditionally used to explain colonial failure. The impossibility of establishing ultimately successful colonial societies was explicitly linked to disease in relation to colonial Jamaica (e.g. Burnard 1994), and in the context of a global comparative analysis (Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson 2001). Viruses can thus be used to explain *both* colonial success and colonial failure.

Viruses first *attach* to a host cell and then *penetrate* it. They do not have, however, their own metabolism and require a host cell to replicate. Similarly, colonizers need colonized peoples (on the mutual co-constitution of colonizer and colonized, see Memmi 2003). Some viruses are ‘virulent’ and cause disease; others, on the other hand, are latent and allow the host cell to

function normally. At times this normalcy is only temporary; indeed, viral infections are characterized by more or less prolonged incubation periods. Likewise, colonial phenomena affect distinct colonized peoples in a range of very different ways. As the most virulent viruses invariably kill their host and are therefore the least durable, the most violent colonial formations (i.e. exacting tribute, raiding, massacring, pillaging and their combination) are also most primitive and unstable (Anderson 1962). It is the least visible types of colonial subjection that have proven most widespread and resilient (i.e. informal colonialism, trade imperialism, different forms of cultural hegemony, etc.).

Moreover, viruses have a specific and often limited host range, but so do different colonial forms. Most colonial relationships can only be instituted if a number of preconditions are already in place: targeting recognizable indigenous sovereigns allowed the conquistadors to conquer complex societies; mercantilist economic extraction prefers highly organized indigenous communities that are not unused to formal tribute systems; trade colonialism only needs to control trading outposts but necessitates existing markets and hinterlands; plantation colonialism needs local or distant collaborators supplying a dependable market in slaves and other coerced labour (as well as metropolitan consumers of colonial staples), and so on (for a taxonomy of colonial forms, see Osterhammel 1997). Consequently, for example, while Spanish colonial endeavours in what would become Latin America actually had a quite mixed record of achievement that crucially depended on local conditions (some areas putatively covered by Spanish colonial claims were never effectively subdued), local circumstances also shaped very different patterns of colonial activity in the case of British efforts (for a comparative approach, see Lange et al. 2006; yet again, the comparative analysis of Spanish and British colonial systems is as old as the 'Black Legend'). That different regions were integrated in different networks of colonial subjection at different times can thus be understood as one result of different colonial forms' 'host range': some areas could only become subjected to colonizing metropolises after colonial 'viruses' had evolved in ways that would allow it to *penetrate* as well as to *attach* to new areas. Even if he used a different metaphor, Eric Wolf insightfully noted how colonial phenomena operate in a virus-like manner:

merchants used money and goods bought with money to gain a lien on production, but remained outside the process of production itself. They implanted their circuits of exchange in other modes of deploying social labour, using a mixture of force and sales appeal to obtain collaboration and compliance. (Wolf 1982: 305)

'Implant' is key here, indicating an exogenous influence that does not immediately control processes of production but begins affecting them.

At the same time, Donald Denoon's groundbreaking comparative work on the settler societies of the southern hemisphere is premised on the intuition that Europeans had intentionally avoided temperate grassland regions 'whenever they had a choice' until the early decades of the nineteenth century (Denoon 1979: 512; see also Denoon 1983). In turn, this realization echoed Richard Pares' early exploration of the economics of colonialism, a survey where he demonstrated how the territories that would become engulfed in the 'Great land rush' (Weaver 2003) were actually the least appealing ones from a colonial standpoint (Pares 1937). It is important to note that the areas that would be subject to settler invasion were actually unsuitable for colonial activities. They were for a long time – indeed until the beginning of the nineteenth century – beyond the limit of colonialism's (metaphorical) 'host range'.

Viruses can be transmitted vertically, from one generation to the next, or horizontally, through contact or proximity. Likewise, colonial relationships can be reproduced vertically (one is born into it – colonized people can only give birth to colonized offspring) and horizontally (through the colonial 'encounter' and the resulting subjection of colonized peoples). On the other hand, different viruses can coexist within the same cell. Some viruses, for example, are dependent on the presence of other viruses in the host cell and are called 'satellites'. Likewise, colonial settings are inevitably complex situations where different colonizing agencies operate side by side, and where the very presence of some colonizers and their activities may depend on the enabling presence of other colonizers and their claims. The presence of missions, for example, can benefit from the existence of already established colonial relationships and, in turn, can enable the institution of regular trading relations (Etherington 2005). Integration in international markets can then contribute to precipitating social transformation and allow the encroachment of yet more colonial forms.

Generally, organisms have an innate immune system, but there also are adaptive immune systems that produce specific antibodies as a consequence of particular stimuli. Similarly, anticolonial resistance can be entirely autochthonous or result from the interaction between transformations resulting from the presence of colonizing agents and entirely indigenous responses (the ultimate origin of anticolonial resistance has been the subject of loaded, intense and protracted scholarly debate; see, for example, Adas 1979). Immune systems, however, can also be boosted, and viruses can be tackled with vaccines that produce an immune response. In a similar way, being subjected to a particular colonial claim can indeed afford protection against other claims. The simultaneous operation of competing imperial agencies, for example, often allows colonized peoples to play one against the other while shaping an autonomous political course. A consolidating indigenous authority can also be likened to a 'vaccine'. As it establishes

unprecedented indigenous relations of domination that prevent exogenous ones from being instituted, it boosts the indigenous polity's 'immunity' from colonial subjection (it is indeed another form of oppression, not necessarily a preferable one, but it is endogenous and cannot therefore be considered 'colonial'). Japan appeared on the verge of being colonized by foreign powers but started aggressively colonizing instead in what could be likened to a type of 'autoimmune response' (Kublin 1959). In different ways and at different times, China, Siam, Turkey, Persia, Egypt and Ethiopia also engaged in domestic state building. In this context, quarantine measures can also be effective in preventing the spread of viral infections. Likewise, Chinese and Japanese authorities 'quarantined' westerners and generally endeavoured to limit contact with foreigners. It was an ability to limit unsupervised connections with all strangers that arguably delayed the onset and limited the extent of colonial forms in these contexts and allowed these societies' metaphorical equivalent of an 'immune system' to 'kick in'.

Again, it can go both ways: the presence of one virus can facilitate the activity of yet more viruses, or, conversely, it can detrimentally interfere with their performance. Similarly, missionaries can precipitate societal collapse and facilitate the onset of a fully developed colonial system of relationships, or, as Jean and John Comaroff (1991) outlined in the case of Southern Africa in the nineteenth century and as David Lambert and Alan Lester (2004) argued in relation to humanitarian colonial policies in a variety of settler frontiers, effectively contest the operation of competing colonial agencies. Isolation can enable the development of innate immune systems, or can thwart the development of adaptive ones. Likewise, protracted isolation can stunt or promote indigenous resistance against colonial domination. Different colonial relationships of domination inevitably arise from different situations.

Antiviral drugs are often dispensed in order to inhibit viral replication. While antiviral treatment targets the viral cycle, similarly, decolonization and emancipation, at least in theory, interrupt the colonial 'cycle' by preventing the reproduction of colonial subjection. Thus, at the level of the polity, decolonization ostensibly proclaims that the state is no longer exogenously *ruled*, while, at the individual level, manumission ostensibly proclaims that the person is no longer exogenously *owned*. Significantly, however, some viruses are ultimately immune to antiviral treatment because they frequently mutate. But colonial forms also 'mutate': colonialism turns into neo-colonialism and both emancipation and anticolonial independence have routinely failed in their attempt ultimately to supersede colonial patterns of subjection. Thus, in the context of this metaphorical interpretation, emancipation could be interpreted as a type of 'antiviral treatment' that remains ultimately ineffective against constantly evolving racializing subjecting ideologies. Recognition of formal independence can also be likened to an



ineffective round of ‘antiviral treatment’, where, as colonial relationships of formal subjection morph into neocolonial ones, postcolonial disempowerment persists.

Most importantly, colonial ideologies often see colonialism as something intrinsically temporary, a system of unequal relationships that will run its course until it will itself establish conditions appropriate for its supersession. In *Considerations on Representative Government* J. S. Mill argued for example that colonial domination was a form of government ‘as legitimate as any other, if it is the one which in the existing state of civilization of the subject people, most facilitates their transition to a higher stage of improvement’ (quoted in Bell 2009: 172). Mill thus saw colonialism essentially as a viral phenomenon: as viruses run their course and produce immune bodies, exogenous domination would eventually produce immune political bodies. He contended that ‘vigorous despotism’ from the outside could hasten natural processes and ‘inoculate’ backward peoples; he saw decolonization as the culmination, not the discontinuation, of colonialism. The idea that colonized peoples would one day be allowed to run their affairs independently is not inconsistent with a particular set of colonial traditions; indeed, the notion of decolonization as ‘progress’ is steeped in colonial practice.

### **Settler Colonialism as a Bacterial Form**

Bacteria and other life forms and settler colonialism are also related. It is not by chance that one can talk about ‘colonies’ of bacteria, or about ‘colonial animals’, while in the early nineteenth century natural historians began using ‘metropolis’ to indicate areas in which a species or a group of animals was most represented. This term’s capacity to refer to both domination and reproduction has rarely been noted but remains significant (for exceptions, see Keller 1907: 1; Belich 2009: 177–8; Veracini 2010: 2–3). Besides, metaphors describing the replacement of one biological form with another and/or its reproduction have routinely been used to refer to settler colonial phenomena, especially with reference to ‘planting’ and ‘transplanting’, but also in relation to aspects of the animal world. These metaphorical constructions have characterized representations of settler colonial phenomena since the beginning, and Thomas Hobbes referred in *Leviathan*, for example, to ‘plantations, or colonies’ as ‘children of a Commonwealth’, when ‘numbers of men [are] sent out from the Commonwealth, under a conductor or governor, to inhabit a foreign country’ (Hobbes 1996: 221). Francis Bacon concluded in *Of Plantations* that ‘a Plantation in a Pure Soile; that is, where People are not Displanted, to the end, to Plant in Others’ is

preferable (it would otherwise ‘rather [be] an Extirpation, than a Plantation’; quoted in Irving 2006). At the end of their trek, the Mormons established in what would become Utah the Provisional State of Deseret (they named it after the word for ‘honeybee’ in the Book of Mormon). While this was a reference to what they understood as the ideal for the model society they would organize, if fast-reproducing settlers have not generally been seen as (metaphorical) bacteria, and Franklin, Malthus and Adam Smith, among others, were incredibly impressed with a settler capacity to reproduce at a fierce rate (Bashford 2012), it is because they usually had a relatively good press. In any case, the extraordinary resilience of this metaphor, both ancient and ultramodern, as demonstrated by the paper referred to in this essay’s introduction, should be emphasized.

Bacteria *attach* to surfaces and form aggregations called *biofilms* or bacterial mats. Bacteria do not need living cells to reproduce (except some, such as *Rickettsia* and *Chlamydia*, which can only reproduce inside host cells, like viruses). Likewise, settler collectives attach to the land but generally do not need indigenous ‘Others’ for their reproduction and operation, especially in contexts that fit in with D. K. Fieldhouse’s definition of ‘pure settlements’ colonies (even if less so for what he defined as ‘plantation’ colonies; see Fieldhouse 1966). Indeed, settler collectives typically prefer to operate in environments characterized by what Baruch Kimmerling (1983) defined as ‘high frontierity’ conditions (i.e. low indigenous population density). Where they encounter low frontierity circumstances, settlers consistently consider and recurrently execute the transfer/removal of the indigenous peoples they encounter.

Different bacteria are characterized by different abilities to acquire nutrients, attach to surfaces, move, etc. Bacteria also frequently secrete chemicals into their environment in order to transform it to their benefit. This can facilitate the acquisition of nutrients from the surrounding environment or make movement possible. Similarly, settlers routinely and programmatically set out to reorganize the landscape and deliberately promote the processes of systematic environmental transformation that William Cronon described for example in *Changes in the Land* (1983). Settlers routinely refer to these metaphorical equivalents of bacterial secretions as ‘improvements’, but this process can also be referred to as ‘Europeanization’ (the comprehensive process of transformation of local biotas that accompanies the domestication of settler locales). The ‘Columbian exchange’ went both ways (Crosby 1972), but in the context of the settler projects it was understood as a non-reciprocal one-way transfer.

Individual bacteria often move together and form waves of cells that then differentiate, often forming multicellular aggregates and engaging in coordinated multicellular behaviour. Multicellular cooperation is therefore premised on a cellular division of labour that maximizes access to resources and

ensures effective defence against attack. Likewise, settlers move individually and collectively, while different settlements perform different tasks in different ‘frontier’ settings (for an example of the inherent symbiosis between urban cores and rural hinterlands in colonization processes, see Cronon 1991). Thus, settlers generally prefer to operate in environments where ‘evidence’ of a capacity to advance environmental transformation allows them to think about their collective endeavour as being endowed with an inherent strength. ‘Agricultural and Acclimatization’ societies flourished in all settler societies. Only at a later stage, like bacteria that have completely adjusted to a new environment, did settler collectives embrace their new environments as an ‘organic source of national distinctiveness’ (Kaufmann 1998: 690).

Bacteria are cells that reproduce through binary fission. They are clonal, and inherit their parent’s genetic makeup. Bacteria, however, evolve, at times rapidly. Mutations can result from ‘errors’ during reproduction or from exposure to external conditions (at times, mutation is one result of a particular crisis; this is generally referred to as ‘stress-directed’ mutation). Thus, bacteria acquire exogenous genetic material in a number of lateral ways: they can assimilate DNA from their environment, or, alternatively, genes can be transferred through transduction (when bacteriophage viruses introduce foreign DNA) and through bacterial conjugation (when DNA is transferred through direct contact). Closely related bacteria may thus have very different morphologies and metabolisms. Similarly, settler collectives generally establish neo-Europes by ‘cloning’ (Belich 2009), but rapidly develop unique cultural patterns that differentiate them from their original cores (reflection on this issue has produced a massive comparative literature; for three exemplary moments in the evolution of this debate in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, see Hartz 1964 – who argued that the fragments remain unchanged, Lipset 1967; Harris 1977; Harris and Guelke 1977; and Bouchard 2008 – who argued that the fragments inevitably mutate).

Like bacteria, settler collectives make and remake places and are also simultaneously transformed by them. They routinely need to assimilate to new environmental conditions (in American parlance this process is called ‘seasoning’), and of course prefer to boast about ‘invigorating’ frontiers rather than worrying about ‘enervating’ or ‘debilitating’ ones (in fact, they do both and the two discourses remain dialectically linked; see Valencius 2002). And they routinely face the prospect of assimilating, or not assimilating, into the social body indigenous peoples on the one hand, and distinct exogenous populations that have entered the settler locale in the context of colonial displacements on the other (i.e. slaves and indentured people, and alien migrants and their descendants; see Veracini 2010). Major crises can also accelerate transformation in the settler colonies in a way that could be likened to a type of ‘stress-directed’ mutation: it was, for example, a British decision ostensibly to embrace decolonization processes in Africa that

precipitated South Africa's decision to institute a republic, and it was de Gaulle's decision to negotiate with Algerian nationalists that prompted the settler coups.

There are normally several types of bacteria operating simultaneously in the same setting. In the context of these dynamics, laboratory developed 'culture techniques' can be implemented in order to promote some bacteria while preventing others from reproducing. Similarly, settler colonial polities also routinely develop 'culture techniques' in the attempt to control biopolitically and prevent the reproduction of exogenous alterities within the body politic. The aim to reproduce racially or culturally homogeneous metaphorical equivalents of bacterial 'biofilms' is indeed an explicit policy objective of most settler polities. On the other hand, irrespective of a capacity to enforce uniformity, bacterial growth follows three phases. At first, after entering a high-nutrient environment, bacteria need to adapt. This is referred to as the lag phase, which is followed by the logarithmic phase, when bacteria reproduce in an accelerated way. Finally, there is the stationary phase, when cells reduce their metabolic activity. That this periodization corresponds to the three moments of Anglo-settler expansion that James Belich authoritatively identified in *Replenishing the Earth* (2009) should be emphasized (these are: 'incremental colonization', 'explosive colonization' and 'recolonization').

Antibiotic drugs are generally used to tackle bacterial growth, but antibiotics also debilitate the host organism and ultimately end up increasing bacterial resistance (thus, directly attacking bacteria with bacteriocidal antibiotics may ultimately increase the staying power of bacterial colonies). Similarly, direct anticolonial violence is not always the most effective method of preventing settler expansion. Alternatively, bacteriostatic antibiotics (drugs that prevent bacterial growth) can also be effective. These can be likened to a recurring feature of expanding settler frontiers, where indigenous attempts to prevent further divestment of land and sovereignty through the organization of unprecedented pan-tribal indigenous land leagues, often in the context of revitalizing prophetic movements and other crisis-management responses, are met with panicked settler reactions (examples of 'adjustment cults' include Pai Marire in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the Longhouse Religion, the Indian Shaker Church, and the Ghost Dance Religion in North America; see Webster 1979: 43–72). Shows of unprecedented indigenous political unity for the purpose of preventing further settler encroachment were perceived by settlers in New Zealand and the United States as genuine existential threats – as phenomena endangering the very viability of the settler project. Settler outrage mirrored the intuition that a settler polity that is unable to expand has entered a declining stage of its development.

As mentioned, bacteria at times move *inside* host cells, and predatory bacteria kill and consume other organisms. Bacterial predators either attach

to their prey in order to digest them and absorb nutrients, or simply invade cells and reproduce. Most importantly, bacterial appropriation of nutrients prevents others from accessing them. Nonetheless, bacteria can form complex associations with other organisms, and parasitism (a circumstance where one organism benefits to the detriment of the other) is only one possibility among many. Mutualism (where both organisms benefit) and commensalism (where one organism benefits but the other is left unaffected) are also possible. Similarly, even if at times settlers depend on indigenous labour, settler collectives often aggressively displace indigenous people in a variety of ways: by assimilating them, by killing them off, or more often by preventing them from accessing traditional resources in the context of a zero-sum contest. Mutualistic relationships between incomers and indigenous communities, what Richard White theorized in *The Middle Ground* (1991), are a rare and inherently unstable circumstance. That evolving bacteria can change through time their relationship with the surrounding environment and nearby organisms should also be noted. The settler colonial politics can also comprehensively reorganize their relationships with indigenous peoples. Commenting on recent transformations, indigenous scholars Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel (2005: 601–5) have defined the settler entities as ‘shape shifters’ (bacteria can also quite effectively change shape).

5 Mill consistently displayed a bodily imagination, and famously noted in *On Liberty* (1869) that ‘over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign’. In Mill’s conception, an individual (and settlers were individuals deciding to ‘remove’) is inherently autoimmune, while colonized ‘others’ are defined by a lack of sovereign control over their bodies.

Most importantly, settler colonial ideologies see the establishment of a new society in a different location in the context of a zero-sum bacterial logic. Despite his ultimate disappointment, J. S. Mill’s position on systematic colonization epitomizes this logic: immediately autonomous, that is, ‘auto-immune’ by definition, these experiments constituted unprecedented opportunities for testing innovative policies and for establishing instantly progressive political communities.<sup>5</sup> They represented a movement in which one progressive ‘biofilm’ easily and comprehensively replaced its predecessors on the spot and at the same time left restraining conditions behind. He saw unprecedented reproduction-maximizing opportunities: nutrient-rich environments where new forms could rapidly replicate without indigenous or exogenous competition. For Mill, the settler colonies were crucial testing grounds, laboratories that could play a ‘catalytic’ role in the global ‘improvement’ of the whole of humanity (Bell 2010: 36). Thinking of the settler colonies, Mill, and many with him, saw unique possibilities for developing modernity’s ‘culture techniques’.

## Decolonizing Colonialism and Settler Colonialism

Even if they are both exogenous to particular environments, bacteria and viruses are not the same thing and operate in distinct ways. They routinely

mix, however, and a variety of different viruses and bacteria are frequently present in normal environments. Colonial and settler colonial forms are also always intertwined and a determination to exploit indigenous ‘Others’ is always mixed with a will to displace them (this compatibility contributes to making the detection of their structural separation less immediate). Indeed, one often witnesses what amounts to a genuine division of colonial labour, and even if colonial and settler colonial formations should be seen as ontologically distinct, their ultimate complementarity within imperialism should not be minimized. As Benjamin Kidd’s incredibly influential *Social Evolution* (1894) noted, the ‘weaker races disappear before the stronger through the effects of mere contact ... The Anglo-Saxon, driven by forces inherent in his own civilization, comes to develop the natural resources of the land, and the consequences appear to be inevitable’ (quoted in Brantlinger 1988: 186–7). According to this logic, while indigenous people disappear as a result of some sort of viral contagion, the settlers bacterially replace them as a result of superior efficiency.

On the other hand, not only do they routinely combine; virus and bacteria, like colonialism and settler colonialism, may actually be related. The ‘regressive hypothesis’ on the origins of viruses, also known as the ‘degeneracy hypothesis’, suggests that viruses may descend from parasitic bacteria. Similarly, colonialism is often understood as a degeneration of a putatively ‘original’ and uncorrupted/uncorrupting colonial mode of expansion, a point initially made by English advocates of an anti-Spanish type of colonial endeavour (Fitzmaurice 2003), and repeated ever since by advocates of the ‘empire of settlement’ and imperial federation over other forms of colonial activities, who recurrently emphasized how the ancient Greeks had established colonies that were independent of their metropolises and only at a later stage the Romans had established politically dependent colonies (Edward E. Freeman, for example, liked to compare the British with the Greek ‘empire’; see Freeman 1886). The supporters of localized ‘conquests of labour’ reasoned in similar ways (Shafir 2005).

And yet, despite their mixing and their possible relation, the distinction between bacteria and viruses remains essential: viruses, unlike bacteria, do not grow by cellular division (they are acellular, and use the machinery and metabolism of a host cell to produce multiple copies of themselves). Similarly, the analytical distinction between colonial and settler colonial forms should be emphasized (and Mill, for example, maintained this distinction throughout; see Bell 2010) because in the case of colonialism what is reproduced is an (*unequal*) *relationship*, while in the case of settler colonialism, what is reproduced is a *biopolitical entity*. This distinction sustains both Achille Mbembe’s (2003) intuition that colonialism is essentially necropolitical and Scott Lauria Morgensen’s (2011) claim that settler colonial phenomena are primarily biopolitical.

The discoverer of viruses as distinct from bacteria was honoured with the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1905; Patrick Wolfe should perhaps be considered for an equivalent anticolonial prize for his 1999 *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*. While scholarly reflection on settler colonialism was not unprecedented, in an often quoted passage Wolfe firstly reflected on colonialism and settler colonialism's structural dissimilarity:

But what if the colonizers are not dependent on native labour? – indeed, what if the natives themselves have been reduced to a small minority whose survival can hardly be seen to furnish the colonizing society with more than remission from ideological embarrassment?

6 These authors' failure to include Latin America in the purview of their work is notable, especially considering that Latin American experiences also display a propensity to blur the distinction between colonial and settler colonial forms.

7 It is tempting to note Cotton Mather's staunch support for inoculation in smallpox-ridden early eighteenth-century Boston (and possibly his groundbreaking intuition in relation to germ theory). After all, the self-styled defender of an original settler colonial order was equally concerned about the smallpox viral invasion *and* the simultaneous infiltration of typically colonial forms subordinating a no-longer 'Christian Israel' to the motherland (see Silverman 1984).

In contrast to the kind of colonial formation that Cabral or Fanon confronted [i.e. franchise or dependent], settler colonies were not primarily established to extract surplus value from indigenous labour. Rather, they are premised on displacing indigenes from (or replacing them on) the land ... The relationship between Native and African Americans illustrates the distinction particularly well. In the main, Native (North) Americans were cleared from their land rather than exploited for their labour, their place being taken by displaced Africans who provided their labour to be mixed with the expropriated land, their own homelands having yet to become objects of colonial desire. (Wolfe 1999: 1–2)

In Wolfe's analysis a theory of imperialism that emphasized hierarchical subjection to the colonizing cores and insisted on the subordination of peripheries for the exclusive purpose of exploitation was (again) seen as essentially incapable of appraising social formations essentially premised on the displacement of sovereign capacities and on the destruction/removal of indigenous peoples (for an earlier exploration of this failure, see Emmanuel 2008).

Nonetheless, that viruses and bacteria interact in complex ways should be emphasized: bacterial infections can have viral complications and, conversely, the presence of viruses can further expose organisms to bacterial attack. Alternatively, viruses can infect and kill bacteria. In a similar fashion, at times, especially in the context of 'low frontierity' conditions, settlers can only operate within simultaneously limiting and enabling larger metropole-controlled colonial structures (Elkins and Pedersen 2005).<sup>6</sup> But it can go the other way as well, and imperial and central authorities may have different and at times explicitly anti-settler agendas.<sup>7</sup> British 'indirect rule' traditions of colonial governance were, after all, initially developed in the context of an explicitly anti-settler experiment (Veracini 2008). Thus, viruses and bacteria, like colonial and settler colonial forms, often coexist and mutually support each other, even though at times they can inhibit their respective operations.

When they oppose each other, bacteria struggling against bacteriophage viruses defend themselves by producing enzymes that destroy alien DNA. It is a process that targets what is foreign and identifies what has successfully indigenized – the equivalent of a settler declaration of independence preceded by a party of settlers running amok dressed as natives.

But the distinction between colonial and settler colonial phenomena, as heuristically observed here with reference to viruses and bacteria and their distinct operation, is especially important when it comes to the vexed question of how to imagine the decolonization of settler colonial circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, while it is reasonable to expect that appropriate treatment should rely on a suitable diagnosis, faced with the shortcomings of postcolonial independence on the one hand and with the apparent unwillingness/incapacity of recognizing substantive indigenous sovereignties in the settler polities on the other, we may be tempted to consider alternative treatments. The 1905 prize was premised on the recognition that that breakthrough enabled new ways of imagining different approaches to therapy; perhaps the discovery that colonialism and settler colonialism operate in distinct ways can help in imagining more effective ways of theorizing and practising the decolonization of settler colonial formations.

Antiviral drugs, drugs designed to interrupt the viral ‘life cycle’, are generally ineffective against bacterial infections. While, as mentioned, formal independence and legal emancipation are ineffective in countering colonial subjection because the ‘virus’ has already mutated into something else, in the case of settler colonial phenomena, they are ineffective because they fail to target the structures of settler domination. Declaring that the polity is no longer exogenously controlled, declaring independence from a distant colonial metropole, a rallying cry of traditional decolonization processes, is irrelevant because the polity is a settler colonial polity that is already no longer exogenously controlled. By the same token, proclaiming the equal rights of indigenous peoples (another customary focus of decolonization processes) is also inappropriate because this type of emancipation/assimilation, in the context of the settler colonial situation, is actually a powerful weapon in the ongoing denial of indigenous entitlement. Paradoxically, ‘antiviral’ decolonizations actually *enhance* the subjection of indigenous peoples under settler colonialism. No wonder that, as Wolfe noted in ‘Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native’, settler colonialism has remained ‘impervious to regime change’ (2006: 402).

Theoretically, the metaphorical equivalent of antibiotic treatment would be the answer, a point Frantz Fanon had clearly in mind when he advocated in *Wretched of the Earth* (1967) direct anti-settler violence as a necessary vehicle for the self-affirmation of the colonized. And yet, as noted, antibiotics should be used sparingly, and repeated rounds of the same antibiotic can produce organ failure. The Palestinian suicide bombers of the Second

8 We should pay attention to the ‘metaphors we live by’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Describing recent financial crises with reference to viral and bacterial phenomena, for example, can be misleading. These are routinely described in terms of ‘contagion’ (other metaphorical descriptions borrow from the language of meteorology, e.g. ‘turbulences’ and ‘storms’). The implied ‘treatment’ could be likened to antibiotics: fiscal rigour and debt reduction. These metaphors perform important ideological labour. While references to meteorological phenomena naturalize occurrences that are anything but natural, the language of viral infection and associated dangers preempts discussion as to what should be done (‘meltdown’ is also often evoked for the same purpose).



Intifada, for example, were understood by those who promoted this strategy as an absolutely necessary measure, something that in this metaphorical interpretative context could be considered analogous to repeated doses of penicillin. But a doctor that merely prescribes increasing doses of penicillin even after resistance has ostensibly developed, or simply because it is the only drug available, is a shoddy doctor. One even wonders if that doctor has the ultimate best interest of his patient at heart. At times, no treatment is better than bad treatment, and in any case the best antibiotics are targeted, not random ones. Bacteriostatic antibiotics – in the context of recent developments in Israel/Palestine, demanding a settlement construction ‘freeze’ – and massive doses of ‘probiotics’ – in the same context, the systematic strengthening of the Palestinian social fabric – are likely to constitute a better approach.

If both (metaphorical) ‘antiviral’ and ‘antibiotic’ treatments are not effective or advisable, the solution must lie elsewhere. I would like to conclude by briefly outlining two possible approaches to the decolonization of settler colonialism. As mentioned, in some cases viruses can actually help the host organism deal with bacterial infections (their presence can increase immunity against bacterial pathogens). Viruses are often used as an effective alternative to antibiotics. Historically, the protection of a distant imperial sovereign could at times (even if not often) help indigenous peoples in their struggles against the dispossessory actions of local settlers. International protection of the rights of indigenous peoples, as foreshadowed in the UN Declaration of 2007 and in a related developing body of international legislation, can potentially constitute a form of ‘viral therapy’. As detractors of international organizations point out, subjection to an external authority can be considered as a form of colonialism. No wonder that the Anglo-settler polities have unanimously voted against the Declaration (Merlan 2009 – other polities that currently do engage in settler colonial activities against indigenous peoples could vote in favour or abstain because they could more effectively disavow their actions; see Veracini 2012). In that case, opposition was not against a bland UN statement devoid of practical consequences; it was against what the representatives of the settler polities understood as a form of ‘viral contagion’ and a development that could potentially impair an absolute form of settler sovereignty.

Most importantly, relationships must change: (metaphorical) predatory bacteria can and should evolve. If attempts to enforce settler monocultures have come to an end, the final aim should be to institute commensalist if not mutualist relations between settler and indigenous constituencies in the settler polities. (*Monoculture* is an apt term in this interpretative context: it is routinely adopted by both biologists and sociologists, and it is significant that while contagions systematically undermine monocultures, colonial regimes systematically refrain from enforcing monocultural practices.) To aid this transformation, appropriate ‘culture techniques’ targeting all settler predatory

behaviour should be developed (for an example of how these ‘culture techniques’ could be developed, see Huygens 2011). These techniques should target both aggressive (i.e. outright dispossession and forcible assimilation policies) and passive-aggressive behaviours (i.e. a settler-determined approach to the ‘politics of recognition’ that fails to address substantial inequalities while enabling the settler polity to manage contradictions and acquire a degree of legitimacy; see, for example, Rifkin 2009; Taylor 1994). It is not an easy task and the prognosis is not that good. On the other hand, finally targeting settler constituencies and settler behaviours, rather than maintaining a policy focus on changing indigenous ones, would constitute a major departure.

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