Unsettlement

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In a landmark essay published in 1995, Michael Geyer and Charles Bright outlined approaches that have become familiar in the field of global history as a reorientation of the discipline away from the European universalism of world history and towards new perspectives, especially histories of mobility and mobilisation, travel and communication. The tensions underlying globalisation result from:

> world-wide processes of unsettlement (the mobilization of peoples, things, ideas, and images and their diffusion in space and time) and out of the often desperate efforts both locally (by communities of various kinds) and globally (by regimes of varying composition and reach) to bring them under control or, as it were, to settle them. (1995, 1053)

The term 'unsettlement' is not theorized or even expanded by the authors, nevertheless it provides a productive way to think about dis:connections in processes of globalisation past and present. Indeed, the essay draws numerous parallels between the nineteenth and the late twentieth centuries. In reference to people and communities, it points to dislocation, uprooting, and the dissemination of new ideas in culturally foreign locales.

According to the OED, the word 'unsettlement' is a seventeenth-century coinage which already recognizes its two main meanings: an act or process of unsettling and a state or condition of being unsettled, the latter often the result of the former. Unsettlement produces a state of disquiet on the individual as well as the collective level; it can also lead to massive dislocation (→ **Dislocation**) of peoples and resources.

But how can a term such as 'unsettlement' become a useful way to think about globalisation? For Geyer and Bright it refers to a whole raft of processes that start in the nineteenth and continue into the twentieth century. At the centre is the 'mobilization of peoples' which encompassed entrepreneurial colonialism of the kind that led to over 20 million Europeans leaving their homelands and 'settling' in colonies, thereby uprooting and often destroying the indigenous peoples. Offloading excess population, Europe shifted its many peoples across the globe. In this formulation, 'Europe' is an active agent, intentionally moving impoverished, or politically dissident populations, although the motivations for migration and ultimately settlement were manifold and multi-causal. This mobilization of peoples includes the final waves of plantation slavery and the transportation of indentured labourers, mainly from South Asia, but also Chinese and Japanese emigration around South Asia and the Pacific rim, and Russians colonizing Siberia.

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The dynamics of unsettlement were driven by different factors ranging from 'the movement of protest and upheaval that unsettled Europe in 1848–49' (Clarke 2023, 341) to famine (Scandinavia, Ireland, Southern Italy) to the need for labour in post-slavery plantations and for railway construction (USA, East and South Africa), goldrushes, and simple greed, the oldest of human vices.

Unsettlement in the countries of origin leads to settlement by settlers with its connotations of stability and security. One group's settlement usually means the uprooting and unsettlement of resident populations in the destination countries. Geyer and Bright's phrase – 'The efforts of both local rulers and global regimes (empires) to "settle" them' – has a euphemistic ring to it. Settle can have a double meaning: as an intransitive verb, it signifies literally to find a (new) place of abode for the new arrivals (to settle in a place), but as a transitive verb it means to placate and to calm (down). The two meanings are interlinked where the transitive process of 'settling' leads to resistance and upheaval and usually force, the 'putting down' of insurrections so common in late-nineteenth century imperial/colonial disputes, whereby the euphemistic 'putting down' conceals varying degrees of violence ranging from police raids to massacres to mass 'resettlement'. Many of the disturbing political problems of the present result from the unsettlement of the past.

Unsettlement also refers to 'things, ideas, and images'. Their mobilization sometimes accompanied the 'settlers', for example, via the religious beliefs and cultural practices they brought with them. Sometimes it came in the form of the voluntary importation of ideologies and ideas, for example nationalism, the 'modular' ideology par excellence that could be adapted to different climes and cultures as the influential scholars of nationalism Benedict Anderson (1991) and Ernest Gellner (1995) both emphasize. In the twentieth century, socialism and communism followed, often introduced into the colonies and postcolonies by students after studying in the European metropole. Unsettlement refers to the effects of these ideologies as they travelled and took root in different cultural and religious contexts. Such effects range from stabilization and integration into the 'community of nations' on the one hand, to genocidal application on the other, where in the case of Pol Pot's Cambodia, the word 'unsettlement' runs the danger of irresponsible understatement.

The term 'unsettlement' is finding application in more and more contexts. As a theoretical concept, like the phenomena it describes, unsettlement cannot be easily demarcated and delineated. It can, however, be grasped heuristically through its applications.

The discourse where unsettlement has been most widely applied, albeit implicitly rather than explicitly, is in the discussion around 'settler colonialism', as already alluded to above. While the connection between colonialism and settlement has long been acknowledged by historians working on material from anti-

quity to the present, the focus on unsettlement and displacement is a more recent development. In its most extreme form, settler colonialism is discussed in terms of genocide of indigenous peoples, where the term 'unsettlement' is a euphemism at best. Patrick Wolfe (2006, 387) sees settler colonialism as 'inherently eliminatory but not invariably genocidal'. Eliminatory means here conscious strategies to break down native society and integrate it into colonial structures which may include European notions of land title, bans on indigenous languages as well as 'biocultural assimilations' through intermarriage, residential schooling and in extreme cases forced adoption of children such as the policies pursued by the Australian government well into the 1960s where the tens of thousands of affected people have become known as the Stolen Generation.

Although 'settler colonialism' as a term emerged in the context of postcolonial studies, historians and activists alike eventually realized that it could be applied to many contexts outside the usual parameters of British empire colonialism and decolonization. It could be applied to the colonization of the whole American continent and not just North America. Even if restricted to the 20th century, examples abound ranging from Japanese settlement projects in Korea and Manchuria to Germans in Nazi-occupied Poland and Namibia to Portuguese colonies in Africa (Elkins and Pedersen 2006). As an analytical term 'settler colonialism' has become somewhat problematic as it has migrated from scholarly journals to placards in mass demonstrations supporting, for example, Palestinian rights.

The Anglosphere is probably the most successful example of long-term, 'sustainable' settler colonialism, overshadowing its rivals, as James Belich (2009) argues. Anglophone 'settlerism', as he terms it, is a special case, which cannot be explained by economic imperatives alone. Indeed, in its oscillation between explosive 'hyper-colonialism' on the one hand, and periods of deflation on the other, unsettlement is integral to the whole project: 'explosive colonization was driven as much by dreams as by reason' (2009, 288). This approach is less interested in the push factors at work in the old world than in the impact in the new lands, although 'settlerism' undoubtedly had unsettling effects in the communities of origin that were often depleted of young men and women as well as the capital they took with them. 'Settler' initially implied 'men of capital' as opposed to mere 'emigrants' (Belich 2009, 150) although the demographic continually expanded in the course of the 19th century.

Settlerism and its displacement of indigenous peoples is today more than a 'tragic tale' (Belich 2009, 180). As we saw above, postcolonial scholarship oscillates between 'elimination' and 'genocide' in its choice of vocabulary to characterize the relationship. The relationship is more complex. The presumption of the late nineteenth-century 'salvage paradigm' that indigenous populations were doomed to disappear within a generation or two has proven largely false. Displacement is a

synonym of unsettlement and certainly defines the minimum term for the relationship between indigenes and settlers but the decisive shift in the nineteenth century is linked to what Belich terms 'explosive colonization', when settlers didn't just trickle but poured in: 'Explosive colonization changed the nature of the problem facing indigenous peoples from a scale that they could often handle to a scale that they could not. It was decisive in indigenous histories as well as settler histories.' (2009, 182)

'Settler postcolonialism', i.e. the often highly conflictual relationships between indigenous peoples and the descendants of settlers, has been the subject of numerous plays, films and novels. Australian theatre historian, Joanne Tompkins, has examined plays from a variety of settler societies (Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Canada) to explore 'the anxiety of historical unsettlement' which applies as much to the settler as the indigenous subject (2007, 71). Tompkins discovers ambivalences in the settler subject position which has been brought about mainly by a 'whitewashing' of history in regard to the dispossession of indigenous peoples:

> The unsettlement of history can disturb the surface of apparently settled nations, individuals, and texts to reveal gaps in representation, inadequacies of national identities, cultural misunderstandings within a nation, the return of long-forgotten ambivalences, and personal dislocation. (2007, 81)

Tompkins argues that in the theatre at least the unsettling ambivalences of settler postcolonialism can also be seen in terms of the 'dynamic potential' of performance to continually re-evaluate the effects of colonialism.

Processes of unsettlement do not just apply to the conflictual relationship between settlers and indigenous peoples. They can also be observed during decolonization when settlers relocated voluntarily or involuntarily back to their 'mother country' or other places, which in some cases had ramifications for the new/old host countries. One of many such reversed 'settlements' was in the Maghreb, especially Algeria, where French *colons* had established colonies already in the nineteenth century (the affinity between the 'settler' and its French equivalent the *colon*, the colonist and colonialist is already evident in the word). Post-independence Algeria saw the 'repatriation' of over one million French-speaking *pieds noirs* and some Algerian Muslim 'collaborators' back to France in 1962. This number is dwarfed by the ethnic cleansing (Snyder 2010, 332) or forced 'resettlement' (*Zwangsumsiedlung*) of around thirteen million German-speaking inhabitants of eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War. Approximately 1.5 million of these were 'new settlers' who the German authorities had settled during the invasion of Poland and the Soviet Union. Although historians tend to discuss the examples as entirely separate, they are in fact linked, at least implicitly, by the waves of unsettlement that they

brought with them, including the founding of terrorist organisations such as the OAS in France, when disgruntled and radicalized ex-settlers and military personnel turned against the French government.

Unsettlement finds application outside the discursive and contested boundaries defined by the term 'settler colonialism'. We find it in peace and development studies as well as holocaust studies. In peace and development studies, the term 'formalized political unsettlement' is used to describe ongoing conflicts which await permanent resolution on the part of the conflict parties. Such situations are so numerous that the somewhat oxymoronic term has been coined to characterize situations at the end of a peace process, from which, however, no written agreement results.[1] Formalized political unsettlement does not strive for full legal resolution which is often impossible to achieve. It proposes instead peace processes, which 'institutionalize forms of disagreement' rather than resolution, 'maximising the use of creative non-solutions, and practices of disrelation' (Pospisil 2019). Instead of resolution, we find containment; in place of permanent peace, a long-lasting 'temporary' and 'exceptional state' is agreed upon. Underpinning such oxymorons is the recognition that ideals of a political state of perpetual peace proposed by the 'liberal world order' are often scarcely achievable in conflict situations, especially ones with deep historical roots. A concept such as 'formalized political unsettlement' reflects dis:connectivity on the level of belated recognition that the promises of neoliberal, post-1990 globalisation cannot deliver on at least one of its claims, namely that an interconnected world would be a more peaceable one as Thomas Friedman argued (2006).[2] This is also the thesis of a previous book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999): 'I argued that to the extent that countries tied their economies and futures to global integration and trade, it would act as a restraint to going to war with their neighbours' (2006, 586). The updated version, the Dell Theory, stipulates that the existence of global supply chains will prevent conflict.

A more specific application of 'unsettlement' is the term 'empathetic unsettlement' coined by Dominic LaCapra (2001) in the context of Holocaust Studies. Here it refers to the capacity to empathize with the traumatic suffering of others, despite their often-unsettling otherness, although the incommensurability of trauma makes it almost impossible to identify with the suffering described (Bashir and

1 Some of these conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian situation have deep historical roots that make resolution appear impossible. Others are the result of politically and militarily organized 'frozen conflicts' which are designed to make unsettlement a permanent state in order to achieve maximum political destabilization.

2 Friedman's arguments for globalisation and peace can be found in chapter 16, "The Dell Theory of Conflict Prevention", another term for 'Wandel durch Handel' ((democratic) change through trade).

Goldberg 2020). Unsettlement in this case refers to the individual rather than collective responses despite its applicability across cultures and genres (the individual witness as well as the dispassionate historian). Its application in the context of globalisation lends itself in as much as the situations of trauma it describes appear to be proliferating.

From the upheaval caused by mass migration and colonialism in the nineteenth century to the seeming insoluble 'frozen conflicts' of the present, the term unsettlement captures the turbulences and disquiet caused by processes of globalisation. It demonstrates that global processes bring with them massive dislocations, redistribution of resources and even destruction of populations.

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