

Settler colonialism is not distinctly Western or European

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Displacing and destroying peoples by colonisation is not just a historical Western evil but a global and contemporary one

In 1931, Japan invaded northeast China and established a client state called *Manchukuo* (Manchuria). To secure control over Manchuria, over the next 14 years, the Japanese government lured 270,000 settlers there by offering free land to ordinary Japanese households. Japanese propaganda stressed, importantly, that this colonisation scheme was not inconsistent with Japan's commitment to racial equality. Japanese farmers would bring new agricultural techniques to Manchuria and 'improve' the lives of native Manchus, Mongols and Chinese by way of example.

Japan's settlement of Manchuria represents a case of settler colonialism, a concept that was initially developed in the humanities to explain the violent history of nation-building in North America and Australasia. Unlike traditional colonies such as India or Nigeria, as Patrick Wolfe [explained](#), settler colonies do not exploit native populations but instead seek to replace them. The key resource in settler colonies is land. Where Indigenous land is more valuable than Indigenous labour – often because Indigenous peoples are mobile and cannot be easily taxed – native peoples are killed, displaced or forcibly assimilated by settlers who want their land for farming. Settlers and their descendants then justify these land grabs through discourses that both naturalise the disappearance of Indigenous peoples (it was disease!) and stress the benefits of the civilisation the settlers brought with them.

Although settler colonialism has become a valuable framework for explaining the history of Western countries like the United States and Australia, the dynamics that it describes are clearly quite general. Japan's leaders in the 1930s, for instance, similarly salivated at the seemingly empty plains of Manchuria that could be a solution for all the food needs of Japan's rapidly growing empire. And just like policymakers in the US, Japan had a variety of self-serving justifications for settling this new frontier. Its claim that Japanese farmers would contribute to 'co-prosperity' and 'racial harmony' in Manchuria and Korea bore little resemblance to the forced assimilation, discrimination and dispossession experienced by subject peoples there. As such, in popular and academic writing today, there is no resistance to naming Japanese colonialism and imperialism in East Asia or to placing Japanese settler colonialism in conversation with Western settler colonial projects.

What is odd, however, is that, while Japan's colonisation of Manchuria was unfolding in the 1930s, there was much greater reluctance to condemn Japan by Western scholars otherwise committed to the abolition of racism and imperialism. This confusion helps illuminate why other, very similar settler colonial projects currently unfolding in the Global South have received relatively little attention or condemnation today.

In 1936, the noted US scholar W E B Du Bois visited Manchuria, China and Japan as part of a world tour. Japan's rise had long been a source of inspiration for Du Bois, who [claimed](#) in *The Souls of*

Black Folk (1903) that 'the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the colour line'. Japan's wartime victory over Russia in 1905 seemed to Du Bois to augur the long-awaited rise of coloured peoples around the world. And Japan was a rhetorical champion of racial equality in the interwar period. It had tried (but failed) to enshrine racial equality as a founding principle of the League of Nations in 1919, and its diplomats proved vocal critics of Jim Crow in the US South.

It is in this context that Du Bois visited Manchuria in 1936. He would subsequently report that what Japan had accomplished in Manchuria was 'nothing less than marvellous'. Du Bois gaped at Manchuria's absence of unemployment, sparkling new infrastructure and 'happy' people. The absence of an explicit racial hierarchy or segregation between different ethnic groups in Manchuria, with schools divided only by language, seemed to make Japanese rule there qualitatively different from European colonialism. Japan, to Du Bois, was 'above all a country of coloured people run by coloured people for coloured people.'

Du Bois's credulous defence of Japan in the interwar period is a major analytical blind spot

The trouble for Du Bois, of course, was that his Chinese friends felt very differently about the whole matter of Japanese rule in Manchuria. Du Bois struggled to understand the enmity between China and Japan: two 'coloured' nations who should ostensibly be political allies. Shortly after leaving Manchuria, he provocatively questioned an audience in Shanghai: 'Why is it that you hate Japan more than Europe when you have suffered more from England, France and Germany, than from Japan?' A year later, in the wake of the undeniable atrocities committed by Japan against hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians in Nanjing, Du Bois doubled down on his defence of Japan. He wrote that 'Japan fought China to save China from Europe' and that, even if it had committed violence in China, Japan was simply following Europe's playbook. The Japanese had also not invented the practice of 'killing the unarmed and innocent in order to reach the guilty', he emphasised, highlighting similar European counterinsurgency practices in South Africa and the Punjab.

Du Bois's credulous defence of Japan in the interwar period is acknowledged by even his most sympathetic interlocutors as a major analytical blind spot. The point of highlighting these errors is not to undermine Du Bois's critique of the operation of race in the Western world. Rather, highlighting how Du Bois became a surprisingly vocal defender of Japanese colonialism points out how even otherwise insightful political observers can spectacularly miss the mark with respect to understanding how race and power operate in 'coloured nations'. Du Bois's errors, in other words, have much to teach us about why scholars continue to fail to understand settler colonial projects in the Global South today.

In the early 1960s, Indonesia annexed the western half of the island of New Guinea or 'West Papua', claiming to liberate the people there from Dutch colonial rule. In response to a series of uprisings from Indigenous Papuans in the 1970s and '80s, Indonesia resettled 300,000 farmers from its core islands to West Papua in just two decades. Much like Japan in Manchuria, Indonesia lured large numbers of ordinary Indonesians to West Papua by promising them free transport and land there. And much like Japan in Manchuria, Indonesia justified this resettlement or 'transmigration' scheme to external observers by stressing two things.

First, transmigrants would bring agricultural development to West Papua and thereby improve the living standards of what officials [called](#) 'primitive' Papuans. And second, transmigration was not inconsistent with the state's commitment to ethnic and racial equality. Quite the opposite, in fact. Mixing ethnic groups together would produce social cohesion. As Martono, Indonesia's minister for transmigration, put it: '[T]he transmigration programme highlights social integration so that racial

differences and differences between ethnic groups will no longer exist. There is no such thing as one ethnic group colonising another [in Indonesia].’ The disappearance of West Papuans as a distinct group, in other words, would be the natural result of ethnic mixing. These justifications were accepted by Western donors in the World Bank who ultimately funded the transmigration scheme.

Indonesia ethnically cleansed and settled the most resource-rich areas of West Papua

West Papuan activists argued that these official rationales were red herrings; the real purpose of transmigration was not to foster economic development but to prevent West Papua’s secession by flooding the island with settlers. As Benny Wenda, a leading West Papuan activist, put it in a statement in 2014: ‘The Indonesian government is deliberately trying to keep our population low [and] flood the country with Indonesians. This is not what we Papuans need and it is not what we are asking for.’ Indonesian transmigration in West Papua indeed turned Indigenous Papuans into a minority in much of the island, making an independent West Papua much more difficult to achieve in the future.

For a long time, these competing claims about the purpose of Indonesian transmigration in West Papua were difficult to parse. Some observers stressed the settler colonial nature of Indonesian rule over West Papua, whereas others stressed the benign effects of transmigration. But in a recent [project](#), I collected highly sensitive internal government data capturing precisely where and when the Indonesian government displaced Indigenous Papuans and settled their lands over the late 20th century. These data clearly support the claims made by Indigenous activists. Indonesia ethnically cleansed and settled border areas in response to cross-border insurgent attacks from Papua New Guinea. Indonesia also cleansed and settled the most resource-rich areas of West Papua.

In other words, the Indonesian government’s own data undermine its claim that resettling hundreds of thousands of people to West Papua was a benevolent strategy for economic development. Transmigrants were sent to colonise areas unsuited to intensive agriculture but that had great geostrategic value. Indonesian transmigration in West Papua, much like Japan’s settlements in Manchuria, was a tool for coercively locking a contested frontier and its rich resources into the state. It was and is colonisation.

Indonesian settler colonialism in West Papua was not particularly unusual in the late 20th century. If we define settler colonialism as the coercive displacement of Indigenous peoples by settlers, then a wide range of cases fit this bill. To list just a few in Asia: China settled millions of Han Chinese to Xinjiang and Tibet in the 1960s and ’70s; Sri Lanka resettled hundreds of thousands of Sinhalese to formerly Tamil areas in the 1960s and ’70s; Thailand resettled more than 100,000 Buddhists to its southern Malay areas in the 1960s and ’70s; Bangladesh settled 400,000 Bengalis to the Chittagong Hills in the 1970s and ’80s; and Iraq resettled tens of thousands of Arabs to Kurdish areas in the 1980s and ’90s. More recently, in 2018 Myanmar began to attract Buddhists to formerly Muslim Rohingya areas, and in 2019 India controversially made it much easier for Hindus to emigrate to Kashmir.

Between these different resettlement schemes, we can usually discern a common underlying logic. European settler colonialism in the 18th and 19th centuries generally involved a large degree of agency on the part of settlers who moved into areas where state authority was previously nonexistent. The state followed the settlers. Settler colonialism in the Global South, on the other hand, generally takes place within internationally accepted borders and is ‘state-led’, meaning that bureaucrats select settlers, demarcate frontier farms, and fund settler relocation. Settlers follow the state.

Colonised peoples in the Global South have experienced a double erasure: by settlers,

and by settler colonial studies

State-led colonisation, whether for Japan in Manchuria, Indonesia in West Papua, or Iraq in Kurdistan, often escalates in response to insurgency and the fear of secession in ethnic minority areas. Unable to distinguish between who is an insurgent and who is not, states displace ethnic minorities who are actively engaged in rebellion and settle their lands with more stereotypically loyal ethnic groups who can prevent cross-border incursions. As one advocate for Manchurian settlement put it in 1934, the ideal Japanese settler is not just a productive farmer but also someone who is 'ready to draw his gun and risk his life fighting for his country should bandits invade.' Or, as one Burmese official more recently emphasised, settlers usefully create a 'human fence' along contested borders.

Yet, settler colonialism in the Global South fails to attract international attention. Maps circulating [online](#) depicting where settler colonialism is 'still a reality', for instance, almost exclusively depict areas settled by Europeans. Colonised peoples in the Global South have experienced a double erasure: first by settlers and second by settler colonial studies.

We have not seen Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movements on China, Indonesia, Morocco or Bangladesh rocking Western campuses. We have not seen the burgeoning field of settler colonial studies attempt to seriously theorise settler colonialism as an ongoing practice in the Global South. And we have not seen the UN Human Rights Council or General Assembly condemn these states for coercively settling the lands of minority groups, which jars, considering the attention paid to Israel in these forums. Why?

The case of Manchuria is instructive because the mistakes that Du Bois made there shed light on similar mistakes made by Western Leftists today who are otherwise vocal critics of Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine. Du Bois made two errors in his analysis of Manchuria in the 1930s, which together led him down the path of justifying Japanese colonisation. The first was to presume that a state officially committed to racial and ethnic equality cannot be a violent, exploitative coloniser. The second was to presume that the colour line, the central political division in the US, is a master key that explains political conflict elsewhere in the world. Let us take each of these mistakes in turn.

The first mistake that Du Bois made in Manchuria was presuming that a commitment to racial supremacy is a necessary aspect of colonisation. It is understandable why Du Bois made this mistake. White settlers in the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa and Australasia justified their monopolisation of land through white supremacy. Racist ideas like '*terra nullius*', for instance, meant that all the land in Australia was treated legally as unowned and unoccupied before British colonisation. European settlers created rigid legal racial hierarchies in colonised areas, reserving certain areas for whites only. Indigenous peoples were subjects, not citizens, and were often forcibly put into reservations.

Settler colonialism in the Global South is not usually accompanied by these explicitly racist qualities. Indeed, what is characteristic about settler colonialism in the Global South is that it is generally accompanied by a perverse rhetoric of racial equality. Anticolonial leaders across the Global South enshrined ethnic equality as a foundational commitment of their nation-states in the 20th century, in explicit contrast to the racial hierarchies that characterised European colonial rule. For instance, at the Bandung conference in 1955, Indonesia's president Sukarno [emphasised](#) how countries like China, Indonesia and India were united by 'a common detestation of racialism'. The violent displacement of minorities by dominant ethnic groups in settings like Xinjiang or West Papua seems paradoxical. How do we explain the ongoing practice of settler colonialism in countries rhetorically committed to the abolition of colonialism?

White Americans can resist affirmative action by using the rhetoric not of racial supremacy but of racial equality

The way out of this paradox is to recognise that settler colonialism need not be justified by racist ideologies like white supremacy or *terra nullius*. When all ethnic groups in a country have the same political rights, no one group has any greater claim to a piece of territory than any other group. Equality before the law can therefore be used to rhetorically justify the mixing together of ethnic groups within national boundaries. For instance, to justify the presence of Han settlers in ethnic minority areas like Tibet and Xinjiang, China's president Xi Jinping recently emphasised how 'Ethnic equality is the prerequisite and basis for achieving national unity ... the Han cannot be separated from the ethnic minorities, and the ethnic minorities cannot be separated from the Han.' Martono similarly emphasised how settling people in frontier areas like West Papua would 'realise what has been pledged: to integrate all the ethnic groups into one nation, the Indonesian nation.' The rhetoric of national equality was also used in 2019 by India's prime minister Narendra Modi to justify changing the Indian Constitution. Modi emphasised how scrapping Articles 370 and 35A, which long prevented non-Kashmiris from emigrating to Kashmir, would help foster national equality by removing special legal privileges granted only to one regional group.

Racial ideologies are malleable things, easily twisted to rationalise the interests and actions of those in power. This point is frequently made by critical race theorists in the US who [emphasise](#) how ideologies of 'colour blindness' today have been [strategically](#) adopted by conservative politicians to limit redistribution to Black Americans. In other words, white Americans today can resist policies like affirmative action that would affect their material standing by using the rhetoric not of racial supremacy but of racial equality. Indigenous autonomy can be similarly delegitimated by those in power in the Global South like Sukarno, Modi and Xi for purporting to give special rights over a piece of territory to a particular ethnic group. Ethnic equality, whether for Japan in Manchuria, China in Tibet or Indonesia in West Papua, is a useful justification for denying the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples and for flooding their lands with co-nationals. The rhetorical justifications for colonisation may be different in the Global South, but the outcomes – displacement, cultural erasure, and the loss of Indigenous self-determination – remain fundamentally the same.

The second mistake that Du Bois made in Manchuria was to presume that the colour line is the defining axis of political conflict around the world. Du Bois essentially disregarded Chinese complaints about Japanese expansion into Manchuria because he saw this conflict as a distraction from the much more fundamental global division between white and nonwhite peoples. As he explained: 'It is not that I sympathise with China less but that I hate white European and American propaganda, theft, and insult more.' Japan was leading the resistance of coloured peoples against Europe and the US. Its expansion into Manchuria in the 1930s was therefore justified because Japan needed Manchuria's natural resources to 'escape annihilation and subjection and the nameless slavery of Western Europe'.

We can discern a connecting thread here between Du Bois and vocal anti-imperialists today who are often pejoratively called 'tankies'. Tankies are Leftists who are so concerned with what they see as the fundamental evil of the world – US imperialism – that they ignore, deflect or justify atrocities committed by countries that are aligned against the US. The first move is usually to ignore. For instance, as mentioned earlier, in the 1970s and '80s, Iraq expelled more than a quarter of a million Kurdish people and repopulated a long stretch of its northern border with Arabs. Then, in 1988 approximately 100,000 Kurds were killed in a chemical weapons campaign called Anfal (*amaliyet al-Anfal*). However, writing in the *London Review of Books* in 1991, Edward Said, probably the most prominent postcolonial theorist in the Middle East, notoriously sowed doubt about Anfal's existence because he feared that these atrocities could justify US military intervention. Most recently, China's mass incarceration and sterilisation of its Uyghur minority in Xinjiang have been strenuously denied

by a range of Leftist writers and organisations. Tankies have attributed evidence of genocide there to 'Western atrocity propaganda', disseminated by Western state actors to stymie China's rise and justify war.

Tankies are not generally disposed to grant any agency to minority groups themselves

The second move, if atrocities cannot be easily ignored, is to deflect by attributing such violence to the West. This move, like Du Bois's explanation of Japan's 'defensive' expansion into Manchuria, can take the form of blaming Western aggression. Indonesia was obliged to invade West Papua in the early 1960s, the argument goes, because the territory was a Dutch 'pistol pointing at Indonesia's chest'. More recently, scholars like Jeffrey Sachs or Noam Chomsky have argued that Russia was provoked into invading Ukraine in 2022, because NATO enlargement threatened Russia.

Secessionist movements are also attributable to Western interference, the argument goes. West Papuan resistance against Indonesia, for instance, is blamed by Indonesian nationalists on a Dutch 'time bomb' of divide and rule and ongoing interference from Western states like Australia that seek to weaken Indonesia. These fears are not particularly helped by the fact that Western states often do extend aid and support to ethnic minorities in rival states. The fact that the US led international condemnation of Japanese expansion into Manchuria in the 1930s, that Israel has become a vocal supporter of the Uyghurs and the Kurds, or that the CIA did help train Tibetan rebels in the 1960s, for instance, delegitimises secessionist movements in the eyes of tankies who are not generally disposed to grant any agency to minority groups themselves.

The final move, if ignoring atrocities in the Global South or blaming these conflicts on Western interference is not straightforward, is to justify state violence. This usually, like Du Bois in Manchuria, takes the form of emphasising the 'benefits' of modernisation brought by the state. Japanese settlers in Manchuria emphasised the improvements that they were bringing to an undeveloped land. Chinese settlers in Tibet and Indonesian transmigrants in West Papua similarly regard themselves as missionaries of progress, dismissing disaffected Tibetans and West Papuans as lazy ingrates. This is a vexing argument because, in a narrow sense, it is not totally wrong. Just as colonies settled by Europeans today tend to be wealthier than colonies in which Europeans did not settle, areas settled by Javanese transmigrants in West Papua or Han Chinese settlers in Xinjiang tend to be wealthier than otherwise similar areas. GDP per capita in West Papua, for instance, is almost twice that of neighbouring Papua New Guinea, and its physical infrastructure is much better.

However, economic development is not necessarily political progress, particularly when such progress comes at the cost of dispossession, cultural loss and subjugation. It is evident to any reasonable observer that European colonisation of North America and Australasia cannot be retrospectively justified by its economic benefits, particularly when such benefits have primarily accrued to the descendants of settlers. For some reason, however, this point escaped Du Bois in Manchuria and escapes Leftists today. When referring to the incarceration of Uyghurs in China, for instance, the Marxist Vijay Prashad emphasised to *The Nation* magazine in 2022 that it's 'the price that people pay ... [to] alleviate or eradicate absolute poverty.' Such rationalisations are a sham. There are better ways to alleviate poverty than by forcibly incarcerating an entire ethnic group, removing their children, and subjecting them to re-education.

In February 2023, Israel announced that it was authorising nine Jewish outpost settlements in the Palestinian West Bank and the construction of 10,000 new houses there. This decision was met with widespread condemnation by Western Leftists. For instance, New Zealand's foreign minister Nanaia Mahuta Tweeted that New Zealand 'rejects Israel's decision to authorise nine settler outposts in the occupied West Bank ... We call on Israel to reverse this decision and avoid unilateral actions that escalate tensions and undermine the two-state solution.' Mahuta's vocal condemnation of Israel was

noteworthy in New Zealand for it stood in stark contrast to her cautious stance on a similar conflict much closer to home. When questioned in Parliament seven months earlier whether she supported Indigenous self-determination in West Papua, Mahuta emphasised that New Zealand 'fully respect[s] ... the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Indonesia.'

Western Leftists can and should do better than grandstanding on the issue of Palestine while ignoring, deflecting or justifying settler colonialism in the Global South. It is demoralising that the Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas visited China this June and issued a statement denying that events in Xinjiang are 'human rights issues at all'. Abbas claimed that the mass incarceration of Uyghurs was instead driven by 'anti-violent terrorism, de-radicalisation, and anti-separatism', bizarrely echoing Israel's own rationalisations for ongoing violence against his people. The fact that Israel, not Palestine, has condemned the erasure of Muslims in western China should give us pause. The correct response to the prevalence of settler colonialism beyond Palestine is not, as tankies would have us believe, to side with Palestine and be silent on the Uyghurs. Nor is it, as Right-wingers in the West and Israel would have us believe, to side with the Uyghurs and be silent on the Palestinians.

The correct response is quite obviously to stand with all marginalised peoples, be consistent in our political activism, and attend to context rather than subsume conflicts under some wider, more important geopolitical division or colour line. Greed, status and state-building are the key dynamics animating settler colonialism, and these dynamics can be found everywhere. If we fail to learn from Du Bois's mistakes in Manchuria, we are doomed to repeat them.

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