

# GLOBAL SOCIAL THEORY

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WOLFE,  
Patrick



Patrick Wolfe is an Australian anthropologist and ethnographer whose work sparked a surge in studies of settler colonial societies. Wolfe used theories of colonialism and indigenous resistance to generate new and different ways of viewing Australia's history that challenged the standard

ALATAS,  
Syed  
Farid  
ANZALDÚA,  
Gloria  
Evangelina  
BISHOP,  
Maurice  
BONILLA-  
SILVA,  
Eduardo  
BULLARD,  
Robert  
D  
CABRAL,  
Amílcar  
CELAN,  
Paul  
CÉSAIRE,  
Suzanne  
COLLINS,  
Patricia  
Hill

triumphal narrative of civilizing the frontier through pioneering individualism. Unlike most of his anthropologist contemporaries, however, Wolfe did not examine Australian Aboriginal communities, but rather Australian settler society. By making Australian settlement the object of his ethnographic research, Wolfe exposed the taken-for-granted logics of colonization and settlement and turned them on their head. Instead of a natural progression from empty wilderness, to pastoral homesteads, to modern civilized nationhood, Wolfe's work showed Australian society as the product of a protracted "invasion" in the form of settler colonization.

Wolfe's 1999 work *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* launched a major academic reconsideration of the role of settlement in colonization. Wolfe demonstrated that Australian settlers operated according to the perception of *terra nullius* – empty land – despite the obvious occupation of the land by indigenous peoples with complex socio-cultural practices and political economies. In order to reconcile the colonial imaginary of empty land with the embodied experience of settlement that brought colonials into direct and sustained contact with indigenous

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CONNELL,  
Raewyn  
COOPER,  
Anna  
Julia  
COX,  
Oliver  
Cromwell  
CUSICANQUI  
Silvia  
Rivera  
DELORIA  
Jr,  
Vine  
DUSSEL,  
Enrique  
FANON,  
Frantz  
FREIRE,  
Paulo  
GARVEY,  
Amy  
GLISSANT,  
Edouard  
GORDON,  
Lewis  
GRAMSCI,  
Antonio  
GURU,  
Gopal  
HALL,  
Stuart  
hooks,  
bell

peoples, settler cultures develop complex narratives that erase indigenous people's humanity. In Australia, these have included denigrating indigenous networks of kinship and community belonging, positioning indigenous peoples as rootless nomads, with no claim to belong anywhere or to any community – an extreme form of primitivism. These narratives were and are untrue, of course, but they also exert great influence on settler people. This includes anthropologists who have historically conducted studies of indigenous peoples that began with the assumption of primitive absence and, unsurprisingly, continued to find that settlement was an inevitable act of civilizational diffusion to empty lands. Thus the settler colonial perception of empty land became a social 'structure': a conceptual framework that supported the invasive settler colonial society by obscuring, submerging or erasing indigenous presence on the land. This is one of many examples that correspond to Wolfe's now-famous maxim that "invasion is a structure, not an event".

Wolfe followed up this work by delving further into the impacts of these invasive structures. Most notably, Wolfe has continued to expand on his argument that settler colonialism

JAMES,  
CLR  
JASANOFF,  
Sheila  
LORDE,  
Audre  
LUGONES,  
Maria  
MAHMOOD,  
Saba  
MARUYAMA  
Masao  
MAXIMIN,  
Daniel  
MBEMBE,  
Achille  
MIGNOLO,  
Walter  
PATEL,  
Sujata  
PATNAIK,  
Utsa  
PUAR,  
Jasbir  
SANDOVAL,  
Chela  
SANKARA,  
Thomas  
SANTOS,  
Boaventura  
de  
Sousa  
SEGATO,  
Rita  
SHARIATI,  
Ali

operates through a “logic of elimination” – that is to say, that settler colonial power both requires and is generated by the destruction of indigenous peoples and polities. Wolfe has shown that the elimination of indigenous peoples is a continuous feature of settler societies, including the United States of America, both before the consolidation of the state and also after. This logic of elimination often converges with but is not equivalent to genocide, Wolfe argues, because settler colonizers are only concerned with the destruction of indigenous societies to the extent that is required for the settler possession of the land. This is a key point because it helps to explain why societies founded on the elimination of indigeneity also can and do define and protect limited rights for indigenous people through the politics of recognition: cultural protections and individual rights are not equivalent to indigenous sovereignty, and indigenous subjects who are reliant on the state for survival are unlikely to challenge it for control of the land. This argument has recently been taken up by a number of Indigenous scholars, including most notably Glen Coulthard’s recent work *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014). The implications of the logic of elimination continue to be explored and challenged.

Wolfe continues to research and write

SHIVA,  
Vandana  
SILVA,  
Denise  
Ferreira  
da  
SIMONE,  
Nina  
SMITH,  
Linda  
Tuhivai  
SPILLERS,  
Hortense  
SPIVAK,  
Gayatri  
C.  
WA  
THIONG'O,  
NGUGI  
WATSUJI  
Tetsurō  
WEKKER,  
Gloria  
WYNTER,  
Sylvia

WOLFE CONTINUES TO RESEARCH AND WRITE on a wide range of settler colonial contexts. He draws links between Australia, the United States, and Israel, demonstrating how the different ways that racial categories and racialised subjects are constructed in these places all link to similar settler colonial logics and structures.

### Essential Readings

Wolfe, P. (2006). '**Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native**', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8(4).

Wolfe, P. (1999). ***Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The politics and poetics of an ethnographic event***. London: Cassel.

### Further Readings

Wolfe, P. (2016). *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race*. London: Verso.

Wolfe, P. (2011). '**After the Frontier: Separation and absorption in US Indian policy**', *Settler Colonial Studies*, 1(1).

### Questions

How is 'elimination' pursued through both state violence and also legal and political mechanisms?

What are the common stories and cultural narratives that justify settler colonial invasion and dispossession of indigenous peoples?

Wolfe has argued that settler colonial societies are exceptionally 'resistant to regime change'. Why is this?

Describe the differences between racialisation for elimination, as in settler colonisation, and racialisation for exploitation, as in imperial enslavement.

What is the end goal of settler colonialism? Has it ever been achieved?

*Submitted by Emma Battell Lowman and Adam Barker*

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**Shaka Yesufu** says:

August 8, 2018 at 12:27 pm

As an African, I feel we are blessed to have Late President Thomas Sankara who wanted to decolonise the continent of Africa. He came before his time and was never very much appreciated until he was killed. He has some of the answers Africa and her peoples were searching for and still searching for to date. The only way we can immortalize and celebrate the remarkable life of this great son of Africa is to request that one day been set aside for him by the AU as “Sankara Day” observed by all countries in the continent and for our brothers and sisters living in the diaspora. The killing of Sankara tells us that Africa is still under siege by neo-colonialist forces obsessed with regime change in our continent. Regime change is the new name for imperialism. Africans must resist such unlawful invasion like the one seen in Libya.

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