PROFESSOR JOSEPH MASSAD

Professor Joseph Massad is a Professor at the Columbia University. He completed his undergraduate studies at the University of New Mexico and his Ph.D. at Columbia University in 1998. He teaches and writes about modern Arab politics and intellectual history. He has a particular interest in theories of identity and culture – including theories of nationalism, sexuality, race and religion. He is the author of *Desiring Arabs* (2007), which was awarded the Lionel Trilling Book Award; *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question: Essays on Zionism and the Palestinian Question* (2006); and *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (2001). His latest book is "Islam in Liberalism" (2015) was translated to Arabic under the title *Al-Islam fi al-Libraliyyah*, in 2018. Professor Massad has published in many academic journals and has received several international awards.

Independence: The Ruse of Settler-Colonialism

Joseph Massad

One of the most remarkable aspects of the *independence* of states that remains ignored, elided, downplayed, and evaded in scholarly research, is the *white supremacist* settler-colonial origins of the very notion of a State's "independence." It was the establishment of the first *white supremacist* European colonial-settler State in 1776 by white colonists in what became the United States that inaugurated the age of "independence," a trajectory that ends with the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) by the European colonial settlers of Rhodesia on 11 November 1965.

The secession and subsequent independence of Europe's white colonists in the settler colonies of the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Oceania takes place during the almost two centuries that separate the independence of the first and last white supremacist colonial-settler states. During this period and after, "independence" would become the political and economic goal of the natives of Europe's colonies and settler-colonies, both within Europe (in Ireland and Poland) and across the globe. But, if the nineteenth century ushered in the independence of the North, Central, and South American and Caribbean settler-colonies, and some of the Oceanian and African settler-colonies (Liberia, Orange Free State, etc.), and the Christian "European" provinces of the Ottoman State(beginning with Greece), the momentum of independence advanced more rapidly in the wake of WWI, both for the white colonial settlers of North America and Africa, and Oceania as much as for the natives of Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

The pace became unstoppable after World War II. Aside from the independence of the European settler colonies of Israel (1948), South Africa (although it was founded in 1910, it exited the commonwealth and ended its Dominion status in 1961), and Rhodesia (1965), scores of Europe's colonies, settler-colonies, protectorates, and Mandated territories obtained independence, ushering in the world of independent states across the globe. Since the mid 1970s, the Portuguese settler-colonies of Angola and Mozambique, the independent settler colony of Rhodesia also became independent states.

Since "independence" as a concept and political practice, seems to equate the now independent countries, whether controlled by natives or colonial-settlers, it simultaneously ends the era of formal colonialism and perpetuates and legitimates not only economic imperialism, but also formal settler-colonialism, recognizing both as in possession of sovereignty ratified by the latest global forum designed to grant such legitimacy, namely the

United Nations. Yet, independence, as both a political idea and practice of sovereignty, continues to be marketed by all these countries as a political and economic good that ended the unjust rule of colonial powers in the case of the colonies or that of the mother countries in the case of the settler-colonies, even and especially if in the case of the latter it meant the continued subjugation of the indigenous peoples-- from the first Nations of Canada and the Native Americans of the United States and the indigenous populations across Central and South America, to the Aborigines of Australia, the Palestinians, the Maoris, the Kanaka Maoli, , and, not least, Black South Africans and Zimbabweans.

Whence arose this concept of independence? What was its historical and geographic trajectory? How did this white European settler-colonial principle become also the goal of the colonized natives and indigenous peoples of the world? That the formal independence of white Protestant British colonial settlers resulted in outcomes far different from the formal independence of the natives of Europe's colonies or even that of the Spanish and Portuguese colonial settlers and their mixed race descendants seemed to signal, to many European and white American commentators, less that the principle was invented to benefit mainly Europe's English-speaking Protestant colonial settlers from its inception, but the colonially-predicted "failure" of natives and non-English settlers to manage their own affairs.

In my forthcoming book, I trace some of the key juridical, philosophical, and political histories of the concept and practice of independence in order to understand its global effects as the primary principle for the existence of the State system since the late 18th century, and how the concept of self-determination would join it during and after World War I, as a corollary, to institute white European colonial and settler-colonial privileges over the indigenous peoples of the colonies.

Most accounts of "independence" depict it as an outcome of the European Enlightenment and Revolutionary thought, which is committed to "universal" human equality and freedom. In fact, the genealogy of "independence" is entirely inseparable from the 18th century new ideology of white supremacy and settler-colonialism, and that this deep co-foundationalism is what liberal Euro-American historians and theorists and their disciples need to forget, repress, and deny.

Before the term "independence" came into existence and acquired political significance and legal status, other concepts were used to separate from or leave the control of a sovereign. The Dutch "Act of Abjuration" of 1581 is often referred to anachronistically to mean a "declaration of independence," especially as it is alleged that white American colonial settlers would later cite it as an inspirational precedent to their own desire to declare independence, even though the Dutch "Plakkaat van Verlantige" was in fact a renunciation (the Dutch word means "abandonment") of the sovereignty of King Philip II of Spain, in effect a secession (itself a sixteenth century English term) and did not posit notions of dependence or independence as operative.

The Dutch abjuration was a religious one, of Protestants resisting the religious persecution of King Philip, but also a territorial and economic one, wherein sections of the Dutch nobility and bourgeoisie felt insecure about being part of a much larger empire and wanted to secure their interests from outside control. Still the coupling of the whiteness and Protestantism of the English-speaking settlers would set them apart from all others in the course of the centuries to come, as they would be the only colonists to achieve both political *and* economic independence (the two other exceptions would be the British-sponsored settler colonies of South Africa and its Dutch and English white Protestant colonists and the European Jewish settler-colony of Israel, whose colonial project was designed by British Protestant evangelicals).

It is in the middle of the eighteenth century in the latest literature on "the law of nations," however, where the term is inaugurated and would soon acquire a juridical and technical sense, referring to the status of a State in what becomes the society of nations. The basis

of what becomes modern international law was in fact created by the colonial encounter in the Americas in the sixteenth century through the major figure of Francisco de Vitoria and wherein the questions of civilized and barbarian nations, of defensive and aggressive wars (later "just" and "unjust" war), were concretized and continue to inform the discipline through the present.

However, the "independence" of States *tout court* did not become part of this legal lexicon for another century or so. The word "independent" is a seventeenth century English term that begins to be used in a political sense in midcentury. It took another century before the term "indépendance" in French, or "independency" and/or "independence" in English, begins to acquire a political meaning akin to what it would refer by the last quarter of the eighteenth century. It was the Swiss Emer de Vattel who would use the term in such a manner that instituted it as the new technical term that came to be known as the *independence* of a State.

The question of settler colonialism is paramount in the mind and thought of Vattel, which may explain his later popularity among the white Protestant English-speaking colonists and their descendants in the thirteen British colonies of North America. In the tradition of John Locke and other liberal political theorists, Vattel was intent on justifying white European colonization of the lands of non-Europeans and registered his support specifically for English-speaking settler-colonists, as he was more discriminatory than others in refusing to grant legitimacy to *all* settler-colonization. His notion of independence indeed focused on settler-colonialism as its principal example. Vattel's influence on North American figures who led the thirteen colonies to "independence" was most pronounced given his whole-hearted support for the white colonists. Vattel's book became a staple textbook at American colleges and after "independence," the major reference in American theory of international law.

In addition to the key concept of "independence," it is also often claimed that anti-colonial nationalism

and self-determination have a coeval history, indeed, that self-determination is the principle through which anti-colonialists would achieve their declared goal of *independence* from colonialism. The story goes that anti-colonialism and self-determination emerged around the same historical juncture and that the colonial recognition of one automatically leads to the colonial recognition of the other. Yet, on closer inspection, this is also a misleading narrative.

Not only is the dominant form of self-determination a principle designed to limit the claims of anti-colonial nationalism and to enhance the claims of colonialism, especially the settler-colonial variety and its "right of conquest," but even more importantly colonial and settler-colonial resistance and reticence to recognizing the colonized as nations that deserve independence would only be mitigated once self-determination became the operative criterion by which substantive political, let alone economic, independence can be negated. In the case of settler-colonialism, the settler-colonists would only accede to a recognition that the indigenous peoples whose lands they usurped are *nations* is the moment self-determination is introduced as a principle or a right that not only would *not* lead to the declared goal of "independence" from settler-colonialism, but rather one that would effectively *obstruct* it.

This can be observed in settler-colonies around the globe. From the Americas to Australia, from Palestine and Algeria to Rhodesia and South Africa, the colonial settlers fought and mostly preserved their "right of conquest" as a right to "self-determination." European colonial nationalism was predicated on the understanding that colonizing countries, like Britain and France, formed nations, which were judged as a civilized form of community and even as a political achievement that many among the colonized did not constitute, let alone were able to achieve. It was in this context that the British and the French denied that the colonized constituted nations, and declared them no

more than a motley of different communities, tribes, clans, castes, sects, etc.

Whereas self-determination had emerged in the late 1890s as a socialist principle, espoused by Karl Kautsky but more importantly by Vladimir Lenin as an anti-colonial right par excellence, colonizing countries and the settler-colonists became concerned with its increasing popularity. It was in the context of the Russian Revolution, which quickly moved to apply self-determination to the non-Russian subjects of the former Russian Empire, that Woodrow Wilson hijacked this socialist concept and deployed it at the Paris Peace Conference as a right to be granted only to the colonies of the defeated empires of WWI, but certainly *not* to those colonized by the victorious empires.

However, it was earlier, in the context of the Scramble for Africa, and the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, that colonial powers supported indigenous Africans' right to dispose of their lands to European colonists. The Scramble was increasingly successful in taking over much of Africa through negotiating treaties with native sovereigns. One of the delegates to the Berlin Conference insisted that modern international law was leading to the recognition "of the right of native tribes to dispose freely of themselves and of their hereditary territory," and that this right was to be "extended" to require the "voluntary consent of the natives whose country is taken possession of, in all cases where they had not provoked the aggression." It is this right of the colonized to dispose of themselves that was construed by the colonial countries and the settler-colonists in the twentieth century as "self-determination," in complete contradistinction to the concept's socialist origins.

As both "independence" and "self-determination" turn out to be concepts that aided the legitimation of settler-colonialism and the delegitimation of the rights of the natives of the settler-colonies, a revision of their application and uses since the 18th century clarifies the strategies and deception that deployed them and the resistance and subversion they encountered.

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All of these crises are being aggravated by the impact of the pandemic, revealing the inability of humanity to tackle them collectively, and invalidating the romantic discourse of globalization. As history continues its march, we are reminded that the answer to the common problems of humanity cannot be found by becoming more introverted, polarized or prejudiced. No matter how severe our problems, our destiny should not be seen as unchangeable. The problems we experience are primarily a result of human activity, and can be overcome only through human effort, but we should remain aware that there are many different hurdles to be passed if we are to rid ourselves of the crises being experienced in many parts of the world.

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