Sturm on Kotef, 'The Colonizing Self: Or, Home and Homelessness in Israel/Palestine'

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Reviewed by Tristan Sturm (Queen's University Belfast) Published on H-Diplo (November, 2021)
Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

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The compendium of settler colonial studies has, rightfully, focused on the plight of the colonized. Hagar Kotef turns the gaze to the subject positions of colonizers in this book. But rather than exploring the technologies, logics, and legal structures of power and violence of colonizers, Kotef explores the most intimate of spaces of the home as that which legitimizes and extends out the passive and active acts of colonial violence, by exploring specifically how the “self” is co-constituted with and through the home.[1] Her hypothesis is that colonial space and culture continue to form and perpetuate these co-constitutional subjectivities as colonizers come to desire them.

But how, when rooted in home and the belonging that temporal and material inhabitation entail, does one call into question the legitimacy of their home and ultimately decolonize it and themselves? How can their home—spatialized as territory and house—be decolonized within a history of colonization? These are the central questions Kotef asks. While predominately a work of political theory, contributing to and pushing the work of John Locke and Hannah Arendt (and to a lesser extent, Aristotle), the book’s most convincing narrative lies in its dealing with the materiality and affect of home, specifically the digestion of colonization therein: growing, consumption, and desire.[2]

Home can be a place of belonging, of social relations, and of community attachments. It is not necessarily a location but is also what we know, and away is what we don’t. Home is a set of practices as well, doing things that make sense with who we are. As such it is also a metaphor for the state and the nation. Kotef is less interested, however, in the classic debates in feminist theory about the insides or private space of the home. That is, while she briefly reviews this literature, Kotef is less concerned with countering the discourses of home as a space for peace, intimacy, love, shelter, and flourishing or equally as a space of domestic violence, racial and class exclusion, and patriarchal relations.

Home has often been shut out of political theory, either as a foundation or simply the realm of the private and therefore outside of the realm of politics. Kotef is more concerned with what extends from home, the outside that the inside develops, namely, territorial expansion and settlement and the discourses that seek to justify practices and Israeli presence. Kotef writes in this regard, it is “no longer the intimate violence in the home, but mass violence that occurs through and by the means of homes” (p. 74). This expanding enterprise includes settlement development, “hilltop youth” mobile homes and tents, and organic farms in the West Bank, all of which extend out from the locus of house
and home.

The book begins with a preface, introduction, and a theoretical overview. The body is organized into three sections on the topics of “Homes,” “Relics,” and “Settlement,” each consisting of three chapters. The first section’s chapters provide the theoretical overview and intervention of making “home” a category in political theory. The central thesis here is that home is dependent on violence in the work of, specifically, Locke. In other words, there is a violence that is foundational to political belonging. Reviewing Aristotle, the home or oikos is the “other” of politics or polis: it is perfunctory necessity. It is with Arendt and Locke that Kotef situates home in political theory as a crucial and under-theorized concept. This section begins with Arendt’s thought where home is conceptualized as a stable place from which the political self and action can emerge. From this Kotef argues that home “actually organize[s] and shape[s] different political orders” (p. 2).

Kotef argues that for Locke the basic political unit is a propertied household. Here occupation is labor and labor is occupation. Combined with his theory of “first occupant” as a logic of terra nullius, Kotef argues that Locke’s individual becomes a home or base territorial unit. But as Kotef points out, only specific individuals are granted the territorial extension of home. Men and men’s labor, and not women or servants, are granted propertied extension. But taken as a group whole, they constitute “home” as a colonial project. Extending Carol Pateman’s work, The Sexual Contract (1988), Kotef makes the argument that such a contract privileges white and patriarchal hierarchies. In Kotef’s words, the home here becomes the “unification of bodies with a unit that is simultaneously an economic unit and one of kinship…. The expansion of the individual body” (p. 91). The final chapter of part 1 pulls this developed theory into the context of Israel/Palestine.

Part 2 serves to question the way belonging and attachment, specifically liberal ideologies and leanings within Israel, are nevertheless attachments to violence. Here temporality is key in thinking about how liberal attachments to home—as they eschew, abhor, or dissociate violence past—is a convenience to sidestepping the violence that necessitated their present lives, houses, and homes within the ruins and rubble of former Palestinian lives, houses, and homes. Through Lorraine Hansberry’s play Les Blancs (1970) and Annemarie Jacir’s film Salt of the Sea (2008), Kotef argues that community attachments are cohered and built upon temporal violence. Using these illustrative medias, these chapters are about “liberal Zionists” who understand their politics as left but are conditioned by and live within the ruins and rubble of Palestinian homes and homeland. In other words, while not directly or actively participating in violence, they nevertheless benefit from it and cultivate it via “Orientalist desire” (p. 162), normalization, and dehistoricization.

This material presence as a foundation for the stability of the Israeli home is manufactured in distinction to the material absence of Palestinian homes, both as a metaphorical unmaterialized nation-state and as the expulsion of home from the Nakba to present. Kotef emphasizes the temporality at play here, where the dissociation among Israelis living in “Arab houses” is cast as past or history, where in contrast to Palestinians such temporality is ever-present and indefinite. Here the deliberate destruction of Palestinian home is constitutive with how Israeli subjectivity is embroached with colonial dispossession. Kotef seeks to outline the many ways this formation is built. Destruction is constitutive of political subjectivity, whether overtly embraced, ignored as invisible, dissociated, or denied.
Part 3 concerns the settlement activity in the West Bank, which is a more normative, critical settler colonial engagement theme, but here, focusing on the seemingly more mundane activities of food preparation, digestion, and farming. The first chapter takes as its case study the Israeli TV franchise, MasterChef (2010), and a specific contestant who was part of the evicted Amona outpost in the West Bank. The contestant, through the platform of the show, mobilized national sympathy for his “homelessness” and was able to push the normalization of settlement activity into the mainstream of Israel society. Through narratives of picking herbs in the West Bank and cooking Arab food, the contestant cultivates a “collective effort to consume Palestine itself” (p. 213). The next chapter, and certainly one of the most interesting, explores an illegal outpost turned organic farm settlement called “Gav’ot Olam” (or Givot Olam, which is the largest organic farm in Israel) via a series of interviews with the lead settler, Golan (a pseudonym), and his community. Here the relationship between organic food and violent accounts of murder and everyday violence are thrust into the obscuritory ethics of organic farming and settlements in the occupied territories. The final chapter explores further these ethics and how agriculture not only sustains and justifies settlements, but also “washes” the foundations of violence away by producing a discourse of ethical acquisition of food (and land). This focus on the link between food production and preparation with violence is succinctly described as “digesting the occupation” (p. 260). Moreover, while part 2 explores the home as a “relic” of violence in inhabited homes, part 3 explores the active, corporeal violence of colonization. Kotef, especially in the third chapter, however, is careful not to draw too stark of a line between the two, acknowledging that both produce and perpetuate violence.

Kotef concludes by asking, how can the colonizing self be decolonized and inhabit in noncolonial ways? Kotef’s answer is to understand the mechanisms embedded in colonized home space. It is therefore not enough to reveal violence, especially in an age where violence is more visible than ever. Part of this must entail a confrontation with the colonial reality of the colonial past, present, and future, and thus to break down the dissociated rift between coloniality and the self and explore how violence is negotiated through identity. Kotef asks us to “understand the schemes of justification of the orders of violence we seek to fracture” (p. 262). Colonizers need to realize how deeply embedded and co-constituted they are by violence and how this sociocultural network of belonging and identity threatens new ways of being and knowing.

This book is a starting point, or “merely the beginning” (p. 266), as Kotef writes, for thinking about the relationship between identity and violence through the concept of home. Moreover, Kotef’s conceptualization, folded analytic, and focus on home “encapsulates a structure of belonging that is not limited to Israel” (p. 23). Indeed, while there is no concrete prescriptive resolution in the book, the aforementioned interventions can serve as a template for other colonial geographies which could be expanded out to account for the specific intimacies of violence that are negotiated differently by different groups. Here I am thinking of Northern Ireland, a country I live in currently whose settler colonial past is undergoing a reckoning through an assemblage of internal and external factors, from Brexit and COVID to political party and community breakdown, that has spurred on renewed structural discourse about Irish unification that would require the home of many loyalists and unionists to be reimagined and new political alliances to be formed to forestall further violence.

The Colonizing Self is an excellent book, a personal book, lovingly written, and one that pushes many boundaries in political theory, settler colonial studies, and even geography to think through the materiality and temporality of home in relation to colonial subjectivity.
Notes


*Tristan Sturm is senior lecturer in geography at Queen’s University Belfast. He writes on apocalypses related to Christian Zionists, climate, and health. He is currently finishing a book entitled The Future is a Foreign Country: Christian Zionists and Landscapes of the Apocalypse in Israel/Palestine.*


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