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The moral economy of settler colonialism

Israel and the “evacuation trauma”

*Nicola Perugini*¹

Abstract: *The evacuations of settlements in a colonial situation can represent moments of potential rupture and reversal of a political order rooted in dispossession. In the case of Israel/Palestine, however, such moments are characterized by the re-articulation and re-legitimization of the settler colonial enterprise. This takes place through the development of a specific moral economy founded on the political mobilization of trauma. Drawing attention to the multifaceted ways in which the evacuations of the colonies are translated by different social actors into a moral inversion –where the evacuated dispossessor becomes a traumatized victim– allows us to grasp one of the dominant moral imaginaries in Israel’s settler colonial model.*

Keywords: *Israeli evacuations / moral economy / trauma / dispossession / settler colonialism*

Trauma does not in itself legitimate a political claim [...]. Trauma does not produce entitlement [...]. In a reactive relation to trauma, the trauma determines us unilaterally, even as we operate within its horizon and by way of its internal logic [...]. Trauma presents us with a specific responsibility precisely because it threatens to render us pure victims who, by definition, cannot take responsibility for the conditions we impose on others.

JUDITH BUTLER, *Parting Ways. Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012)

At the beginning of October 2012 the Israeli newspaper *Jerusalem Post* published an article entitled *Peace-Traumatic Stress Disorder*. The author, Michael Freund diagnosed a widespread pathology among Israeli politicians: a psychological disorder whose roots, according to Freund, can be traced back to the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo peace agreements’ period (1993-1999), and the successive unilateral measures adopted by different Israeli

¹ I am grateful to the School of Social Science of Institute for Advanced Study of Princeton for conferring me the 2012-2013 Fellowship that made possible the writing of this article. While I was a Richard B. Fisher Member at the Institute, I benefited from the precious suggestions of many colleagues who read and commented different version of this article: Lorenzo Alunni, Lucas Bessire, Vincent Dubois, David L. Eng, Sara Farris, Didier Fassin, Neve Gordon, Laurence Ralph, Catherine Rottenberg, Joan W. Scott.

governments as a result of what their leading figures called “the absence of a Palestinian partner for peace”. Freund describes the “syndrome” as an “anxiety condition”: the will of the Israeli leadership to relinquish the “Land of Israel” through unilateral steps –the evacuation of some of the colonies established after the 1967 occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The direct target of his article is the ex-Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak and one of his recent speeches at the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies, when the Minister advocated for more Israeli unilateral action in order to “achieve peace in the region”. In Freund’s column, Barak –together with the right-wing Netanyahu-led Israeli government– was accused of promoting the conditions for the emergence of what the author calls “new Arab terror” and fuelling “intra-Jewish conflict” by proposing the unilateral measure of new disengagements from some non-strategic outposts of the West Bank:

What about the 2005 unilateral [Israeli] pullout from Gaza [implemented by the Sharon government] and the expulsion of the Jews from Gush Katif [the name of the block of Israeli settlements in Gaza, evacuated in 2005], which brought Hamas to power and exposed southern Israel to unprecedented rocket fire? [...] Israel implemented a policy of unilateral withdrawal, and it blew up in our faces. [...] The current government seems to be determined to recreate the trauma of forcibly removing Jews from their homes.

From the start, the non-ironic piece defines the difference between PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) and PETS (Peace-Traumatic Stress Disorder) as a mental health expert would when compiling a pathological index: “Whereas most of those who suffer from stress disorders seek to avoid any reminders of the original ordeal, victims of PETS ironically follow a different path. Indeed they seem compelled to embrace the trauma, and even to relive it”². The author concludes his description of the pathology asserting that the only therapy against this chronic “evacuation syndrome” consists in reinforcing the Israeli hold on every part of “Greater Israel”, substantially pleading for more conquest of territory and the further reinforcement of colonial sovereignty.

The effort to classify this sort of “immoral pathology” –an alleged “Jewish will to expel a Jewish population”, a formula that is mobilized by many Israeli social and political actors on the occasion of the evacuations of Jewish settlements– has perhaps to be understood as part of a peculiar form that the utilization of the language of trauma has taken within the Israeli-Palestinian situation in relation to the question of the settlements’ evacuation and decolonization. During the last two decades, different Israeli scholars have focused

² Michael Freund, “Peace-Traumatic Stress Disorder”, *Jerusalem Post*, 6 October 2012.

on how political violence has been repeatedly interpreted through the lens of trauma and how political dynamics have often been filled with clinical meanings – on the occasion of the various Israeli wars against its neighbors, with the progressive emergence of the figure of the “traumatized soldiers” (Kimmerling 1993; Bilu, Witztum 2000); and especially during and after the violence of the Second Intifada (Friedman-Peleg, Bilu 2011). But the role of the politics of trauma and its inherent regime of meaning in relation to such a central question within the Israeli-Palestinian settler colonial situation as the politics of settling, evacuating and territorial redeploying, remained widely unexplored.

This tension between deployment of trauma and dispossession –at least in the way I analyze it in this article– is often obliterated in the debate on Israel-Palestine. And this is especially true when it comes to the politics of settling –often reduced to saturating images of settler violence against the Palestinians in the West Bank, and to a caricatural image of “the settler” as a religious-fundamentalist-illiberal (Dalsheim 2011). To be sure, my proposal is not to deny the intrinsic relationship between politics of settling, settler practices and violence, but rather to analyze a wider apparatus of meaning produced during the evacuations of Jewish settlements; an apparatus that is informed by the production of two intertwined socio-political constructs: trauma and morality.

The dismantling of Jewish colonies are for the settler body politic moments of political instability in which the material infrastructures and the affective foundation of the settler colonial *koiné* seem to be at risk. A certain kind of familiar universe of experience seems –from a settler perspective– to be under threat. In fact, on these occasions, the settler system of meanings enters a state of “vertigo” which has to do with the underpinning constitution of the colony: the vertigo of the potential return of the colonized Palestinian in a physical, cognitive and mental space from which she/he was erased, and the potential loss of what has been acquired through conquest, expulsion and dispossession. Many different interpretations and experiences of these “vertiginous” events may potentially emerge within a settler-colonial polity, but what is striking in the case of the two main moments of evacuation in the history of Israel – the state-orchestrated 1982 disengagement from Sinai, and the 2005 one from the Gaza Strip and some settlements of the West Bank – is the crystallization, during both evacuation events, of a common sense of understanding translated into the vocabulary of trauma –a nationally shared trauma. How does this affective “glue” (Ahmed 2004) operate in the framework of settler colonialism? What kinds of epistemic and political forces converge to produce

settler subjectivity as “traumatized victim” and call upon the nation to recognize the trauma of the evacuated settlers? How does it come about that an act like un-settling, that might be considered one of reparation for the Palestinians after decades of dispossession by military occupation and construction of civilian structures of colonization, could instead be interpreted and experienced by various components of the settler colonial polity as one of trauma, victimization and Jewish dispossession?³ How does trauma become a moral “frame”, in the sense in which this notion is articulated by Judith Butler (2005), enabling a series of operations of power whose ultimate effect is the re-legitimation of a regime of violence and displacement of the native?

My proposal is to answer these questions by exploring the specific ways in which – relying upon a series of clinical terms and tropes with which the Israeli public has become quite familiar– different Israeli social actors, having different political orientations, mobilize politically a series of moral feelings and values imbued with a traumatic register and whose political valence consists in the reproduction of both a Jewish settler-colonial morality and polity. I argue that the evacuations are relatively unexplored moments in which a certain kind of settler colonial ethos emerges, one in which a particular political utilization of trauma becomes clearly manifest. Indeed, in a certain way, defining and experiencing the evacuations (the potential end of the colony) as traumatic (and thus morally illegitimate) corresponds to reaffirming the legitimacy of the colonization enterprise and re-tracing the moral-political limits of a community erected on settling and dispossession of the native.

This re-legitimization takes place through a twofold utilization of the register of trauma – a socio-political register that has a global dimension, as many of the cases described by Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman in their *Empire of Trauma* (2009) show⁴– in a way that allows the perpetrators of violence (the “traumatized settler”) to find legitimization for their activities of dispossession. The first of the utilizations consists in its de-

³ We could argue, with Idith Zertal, that trauma is the language through which the Zionist project has given itself a legitimacy to inscribe and geographically transfer a combination of memory and oblivion of the European Holocaust to this region; and trauma has also been the language adopted in order to create a peculiar settler colonial citizenship through the transferring and dispossessing of the Palestinian inhabitants of the region. This process of construction of the Israeli national identity –based on the partial erasure of the Palestinian physical and imaginative presence– resulted in what Zertal defines the “trauma community” or “victim community” (Zertal 2005). What is interesting in the case of the evacuations is that trauma is not mobilized in order to legitimize settler dispossession, but rather to prevent its end.

⁴ Rechtman and Fassin, in their description of the global landscape of suffering, explore different cases of mobilization of the moral economy of trauma: US veterans, Israeli and Palestinian NGOs during and after the Second Intifada, refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, the Balkan conflicts and other situations of humanitarian intervention. In many of these situations, the appropriation and deployment of trauma discourse reproduces and naturalizes a variegated array of inequality and domination relationships.

historicization: trauma and victimhood are claimed by decontextualizing it from the stratification of dispossessions (against Palestinians) in which the claimants (the settlers) live and which they contribute to reproduce. The second consists in the transformation of the clinical register of trauma into a moral one, whose ultimate aim is the legitimization of settling as an act of justice, and the identification of un-settling with injustice. We could define this twofold utilization of the register of trauma in the context of Palestine/Israel as the moral economy of settler colonialism –*the social production, mobilization and circulation of moral values and norms politically functional to the perpetuation of settler colonial dispossession*. Here the trauma discourse acquires three main functions: it is adopted for the description of an experience of suffering; it erases the historical conditions of possibility that led to that experience; it fuels a twofold moral claim about the justness of the colony and the un-justness of its end.

In his proposition to revisit the notion of moral economy and develop an anthropology of the relationship between morality and politics, Didier Fassin stressed the heuristic relevance of those efforts of investigation which try to understand the political valence of the articulation, mobilization, and socio-political organization around the deployment of moral feelings and values (Fassin 2012). In the case of the Israeli evacuations of Jewish settlements, this notion is relevant both to the analysis of the dynamics of the evacuations and the theorization of their implications as a way of understanding the broader settler-colonial situation of Palestine/Israel.

Analytically, it reveals the political implications of the deployment of trauma by the various actors involved in the evacuations. Living and interpreting the experience of the evacuation as a trauma inscribed in a linear sequence of Jewish expulsion and victimization can be analyzed –in light of the fact that the evacuations are ontologically related to an inceptive dispossession of the native– as a specific moral and political understanding of history that relies upon a trauma discourse that erases the moment of inception (and its historical repetition). Hence, the moral economy I focus on corresponds to a mechanism of constructing a particular settler-colonial political subjectivity based on the disavowal of native presence. This specific configuration of trauma produces a shared understanding (an affective glue) that the evacuations are a violation of the fundamental values and norms constituting the Jewish-Israeli settler-colonial self and body politic.

From a theoretical point of view, the notion of moral economy also seems appropriate to grasp another fundamental specificity of the political operation displayed during the

evacuations. In fact, my central argument here is that what takes place during the evacuations is a form of “moral inversion”, one in which what would be commonly understood within the framework of a moral economy of political reparation (the recognition of a practice of colonial dispossession) takes on the contours of (an experience of) victimhood: a traumatization of the national settler community and a violation of what Kareem Rabie and I defined as the “human right to the colony” (2012) – the claim to the right to colonize based on the argument that preventing colonization would correspond to a violation of the human rights of the settlers. Fundamentally, in the moral economy I investigate the potential end of domination is experienced and interpreted as the beginning of a regime of oppression against the Jewish settler polity. The 1982 evacuation from Sinai and the 2005 one from Gaza are two climactic moments in the emergence of this political deployment of “inverted” moral values. In the moral economy of settler colonialism the dispossessor (the settler-evacuee) is represented as the dispossessed and the potential return of the expelled native becomes an experience of settler national trauma. In other words, in these moments of decolonization *manquée* trauma becomes a discourse by which settler colonialism is re-legitimated, reproduced, and ultimately re-enacted.

“Painful concessions” and the “price of peace”

Colonized territory and land occupy a singular place in the Israeli/Palestinian debates, and a special relationship with the moral economies of settler colonialism. In 1982, for the first time in its history, after the Yom Kippur War with Egypt and the peace agreement between the two countries, Israel was forced to prepare and implement the evacuation of its Sinai settlements and settlers –a move that was presented by the leadership to the Israeli public as a costly one: the “price of peace”. Since then, a discursive tension has dominated the Israeli debate on evacuations and territorial pullouts: the “cost of peace” and the “painful concessions” signify the spectrum of “traumatic evacuations” and the possibility of conceding parts of the territory it occupies in exchange for a better relationship with its neighbors. Israeli “hawks” and “doves” have historically met on this common ground of discussion whose premise is that any form of peace, any form of agreement is bearer of something painful and traumatic for the Jewish population of Israel, and for Jews at large. What is radically at stake in this alchemy of territory and “painful peace” is an evaluation of the correct balance between

territory and pain –how much territory can or cannot be relinquished in order not to provoke too much pain in the Israeli public. Here the notion of *evaluation* has to be taken in its twofold dimension: it identifies both a quantitative-territorial and a moral value, one in which the sphere of geopolitical-cartographic and that of settler morality intermingle.

The semantic sphere of painful concession relates to a tension that is articulated, ultimately, in the double dimension of suffering and morality. What is at stake when in the different stages of negotiations with the Palestinians and the Arab neighbors the notion of “painful concessions” is evoked by the Israeli negotiators is a tension between land/territory and values, between a settler colonial conception of sovereignty and a specific form of articulating the “value of peace”. One article on the Sinai evacuation (1987), defines this tension as an “anxiety over the reversibility of Zionism” –the potential end of the settler project.

In spite of the fact that the Israeli public, as some journalists and pundits have suggested⁵, has presumably overcome the “trauma of Yamit” (Yamit was the main Sinai settlement evacuated in 1982), the disengagement and physical destruction of the settlements has remained impressed in the memory of several Israeli social actors as a trauma. Even today, some media, the settler movement and the Sinai evacuees –who are still depicted as “pioneers” who transformed the desert into a “lost paradise”– continue to refer to the 1982 evacuation as an “open wound”.

In 2012, the Knesset –the Israeli parliament– dedicated a ceremony to the 30th anniversary of the evacuation in which the emotional effects of disengagement on the settlers were re-evoked as open wounds: the persistent return of a living past of suffering to the present. On that occasion, Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin described the evacuation as a persisting trauma: “Today too, 30 years after the evacuation of the Sinai region, the memories and sights make our hearts tremble. The State of Israel needs to rectify the injustice of having forgotten you. It needs to remember you as the ones who paid the *price of peace* [Italics mine] and Israel’s commitment to democracy”⁶. The register of trauma allows the evacuation to be described both as a presumed proof of the democratic nature⁷ of the state and more fundamentally as an open wound –in this sense,

⁵ “History foreshadows Gaza pullout”, *Christian Science Monitor*, 2005 <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0721/p06s01-wome.html>

⁶ “Thirty years on, Yamit is still an open wound”, *Israel Hayom*, May 18, 2012, http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter_article.php?id=4390

⁷ The Knesset speaker deploys the tactical evacuation and the “painful territorial concession” as evidence of the democratic nature of the state.

the moral economy of trauma subsumes a sphere of judgment on and the assertion of the democratic history of the polity, erasing its settler colonial nature. The evacuation is still remembered as a painful historical injustice.

The science of the “evacuation trauma”

The discourse on the “trauma of Yamit” and the “price of peace” involved scholars with different backgrounds (some of whom directly took part in the evacuation operations) from the Israeli academic community. Significantly, the Sinai evacuation was the first occasion on which different specialists attempted to analyze the first government-led removal in Israeli history of part of the settler population. In 1987, the international *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* dedicated an entire issue to the evacuation, hosting the articles of various Israeli scholars –sociologists, social anthropologists, political scientists, geographers, clinical psychologists and psychiatrists– who analyzed the disengagement under a title that evoked the moral dimension of the dismantlement of the settlements: “The Price of Peace: The Removal of the Israeli Settlements in Sinai”.

Several contributors to the special issue from different political backgrounds and using diverse –mainly behavioral– approaches focused on the traumatic components of the evacuation, in what can be considered the first attempt at scientifically examining the “evacuation trauma”. Almost all the contributors, to varying degrees, related their understanding of the evacuation from Sinai to some kind of experience of psychological suffering and stress. Sociologist Baruch Kimmerling identified the evacuation with the emergence of a social and political condition of anomie –a “clash of values”, half-way between the sociological and the psychological versions of this notion⁸. Geographer Nurit Kliot defined the disengagement as “geo-cultural trauma”, describing the evacuee as an alienated person who witnessed the “burial of the garden”. In the image the dismantled garden in the colony becomes a living being that is buried, in a further articulation of the process through which the register of psychological suffering overlaps with possession of the land. Kalman Benyamini, a professor of clinical psychology, analyzed the “psychologists’ behavior outside the clinic” and within the new experimental empirical context of the disengagement from Sinai. Mental health specialists who provided mental care to the settlers during the evacuations are described

⁸ The notion of anomie is also used in psychology to describe the state of distress and anxiety resulting from the difficulty of living “normal” –nomic– social relationships after traumatic events that have left a trace in the psyche.

by Benyamini as in a state of disorientation during their succor operations –thus the trauma of the settlers becomes a vicarious trauma, and the victimhood of the group extends to those who treated them.

Echoing the rhetoric of the pioneering settlers, other authors, like professor of psychiatry Haim Dasberg and clinical psychologist Gabriel Sheffler, combined their specific approach to trauma with an alleged Israeli psychological specificity: “Israelis tend to identify with their common past of uprooting, persecution and continuous exposure to Arab hostility. Therefore, the typical Israeli looks for social acceptance and feelings of belonging within a hostile world” (1987: 92). The 1977 visit of the Egyptian president Sadat to the Knesset a year before the ratification of the peace agreement with Israel that then led to the 1982 Sinai evacuation was –according to the authors– one of the main pre-evacuation “stressors” for the settlers. A stress to which the settlers responded by starting to drain the natural resources of the region in which they were settled before being evacuated:

During the time before the evacuation, they [the settlers] began to exploit intensively the restricted sources of ground water [of the desert] so that they could increase the harvest of out-of-season crops; they felt they had nothing to lose by doing this. Thus, the settlers began destroying natural resources, in contrast to their original idealistic intentions (Dasberg, Sheffler 1987: 93).

The two mental health specialists diagnose a peculiar form of “neurosis”: the emergence of a kind of “anti-natural” conduct in contrast with the “ideals of development” of Zionism –a unique form of neurosis, consisting in *making the desert bloom excessively*⁹ in order to leave it in a condition of suffering. The trauma of the evacuation, the “price of peace”, is identified by these authors as a series of pathological behaviors in which the clinical and the moral overlap. Neurosis, depressions and psychosomatic complaints are read as a broader danger of interruption for the whole Zionist project, and as a crisis in the continuity between past, present and future of the community. It is also through these discursive constructions, in the space between the clinical and the moral, that the politics of trauma display their specific politics of history on the occasion of the Israeli evacuations. Clinical, moral and political suffering are welded together.

From Sinai to Gaza

⁹ “Making the desert bloom” is one of the foundational slogans through which Zionist pioneers legitimized, using a developmentalist and modernist rhetoric, the colonization of Palestinian lands and the Israeli state-building process.

The 1982 Sinai evacuation, the different public and social discourses produced about trauma –in particular the debate on the “painful concessions”–, as well as the specific way in which scholars have experienced or told the experience of their involvement in an “event without precedent”, could be interpreted as an “experimental moment” in the history of Israel: one in which multiple actors dealt with an unusual event such as the state-orchestrated evacuation of some colonies through the lens of trauma and suffering. The politics of trauma became the shared jargon with which diverse social groups met, struggled and expressed their moral positioning and their understanding of the relationship between the past, present and future of the polity and the state.

Twenty years later, in 2005, the politics of trauma re-acquired –after the failure of the Oslo peace process and the Second Intifada– a central role in the public debate on the evacuation from Gaza and the Northern West Bank. Significantly, settlers read the evacuation from Gaza as a “new Yamit”, a new traumatic event –as in Sinai 1982– in a long chain of Jewish suffering. But, in a certain sense, Gaza had already become Yamit immediately after the evacuation from Sinai, well before 2005. In fact, immediately after the 1982 Sinai evacuation, one of the first decisions taken by the Israeli government was to approve construction of new Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip. Disengagement was followed by “re-engagement”. This governmental decision led the territorial dimension of trauma to reemerge in a new settler colonial form: the governmentally planned colonization of Gaza provided new territory, a new space of memorialization, in which the settlers inscribed the memory of the trauma and the “pain of the evacuation”:

Some [new] settlements [in Gaza] were given names attesting the desire of their residents to return to Sinai, such as Mitzpe Atzmona (Overlooking Atzmona) or Elei Sinai (Toward Sinai). [...] The yeshiva [religious school] of Yamit was moved into a new building in Neve Dekalim, in the Gaza Strip. The new concrete building [named the “Yamit Yeshiva”] was constructed like a giant Star of David with one point buried in the ground in remembrance of the destruction of the Yamit region settlements (Feige 2009: 203).

It is in this sense that Gaza became a “new Yamit” well before 2005. The evacuation from Sinai was followed by the colonization of new territories in the Gaza Strip (and in the West Bank), transforming parts of the colonized territories into a memorial of the “painful evacuation” from Sinai, and the un-settling of Sinai in the settling of new territories. The displacement of the trauma of Sinai coincided with the new displacement of the native.

The destruction of the home (land)

In 2003, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip and the evacuation of 8000 Jewish settlers – what those settlers considered “the destruction of the home” (Zertal and Eldar 2007: xi). New narratives of trauma –whose ultimate meaning was representation of the evacuation from the colony as a trauma that would result in the end of a Jewish homeland– were triggered before, during and after disengagement.

The disengagement plan was announced in 2003 and implemented by the Israeli security apparatus in summer 2005. The decision to evacuate Jewish settlers was presented by Sharon as an exit-strategy from the “peace process stalemate” (the remoteness of a final agreement with the Palestinians) as well as a “security imperative” resulting from the impossibility of continuing to protect a small number of Jewish Israeli settlers within the Gaza Strip, a territory populated by around 1.5 million Palestinians. In reality, the plan was intended to redesign the broader geopolitical contours of the occupation and colonization. Sara Roy has explained that the pull-out was the result of a decade-long project to isolate Gaza within a wider plan to strengthen the Israeli regime’s control over Palestine. It was a tactical move undertaken during consolidation of Israeli settlement expansion in the West Bank, where many of the Gaza settlers were redeployed (Roy 2007: 325-327). Ilana Feldman described the “disengagement” as another step in the construction of a “fictional” Palestinian sovereignty (Feldman 2008).

In order to grasp the foundations of the politics of trauma displayed during and after the Gaza disengagement, we should pay attention to the colonial configuration of the regime and the political context in which these events occurred. As Eyal Weizman has shown, the disengagement created a sort of state of architectural emergency: the architectural components of colonization, the settling *practices*, the physical structures of settlements and their infrastructures, were under threat, and with them the contours of the Israeli settler colonial subjectivity. Benjamin Netanyahu, at that time Minister of Finance, left the Sharon government in protest at the potential scenario of “Palestinians dancing on the [evacuated Jewish] house roofs” of Gaza (Weizman 2007). Thus, the evacuation took place in a kind of state of settler colonial emergency. Depicting a doomsday scenario for Zionism, an alarmed law expert wrote at the time: “If the status of the Gaza settlements is temporal, what prevents us from seeing [the Israeli cities] Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ramla,

Lydda, Beer-Sheva, Eilat or Karmel as occupied territories, which would have to be evacuated eventually?”¹⁰.

On the ground, during the evacuation procedures, the Gaza settlers produced a series of practices explicitly referencing the Holocaust. Some “tattooed” their ID numbers on their arms, protesting against “being placed in ghettos”¹¹; many wore orange clothes and orange and yellow stars while being evacuated; a father, in front of the cameras, carrying his daughter in his arms, was filmed while shouting to soldiers “Expel her! Expel her!” (Gorenberg 2006: 375); some locked themselves in their houses. Discourses and practices knitted together into a moral economy of traumatization and victimization that modulated at various scales the representation of the evacuations as endless repetition of the Holocaust –with which many of the Gaza settlers had had no direct experience. The re-inscription and re-enactment of the evacuations as if they were in a relationship of continuity with the Holocaust produced a specific sense of the endurance of trauma, one that was performed in front of television cameras and in public spaces (Shor 2008; Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2008). Indeed, this public display of continuity of trauma constitutes the performative dimension of the moral economy characterizing the settlements’ evacuations. The memory of the extermination is mobilized in front of the rest of the Jewish nation as a way to impede the physical detachment from the infrastructures of dispossession.

Thus, while it is true that the pull-out constituted a re-articulation of the Israeli colonial regime in the West Bank and Gaza on one level, at another the very materiality of the unsettling triggered a discursive mechanism in which the procedures of unsettling acquired –again, but in a much more articulated shape than Sinai 1982– the form of collective trauma on a national Jewish scale. Before, during and after the disengagement the settler movement added language for this kind of traumatising: terms like expulsion, deportation, displacement, demolition, and destruction appeared in newspapers, television programs, magazines, websites, public discussions, and political debate in Israel. The material dimension of this localized evacuation helped produce images and perform scenes of trauma that were adopted as a moral discursive framework not only by the settlers in their resistance to the evacuation but also in widespread popular representations of the disengagement in the Israeli media. All three levels —

¹⁰ Misgav H. quoted in Shor (2008: 812).

¹¹ N. Hasson, “Settlers ‘tattoo’ ID numbers on their arms”, *Ha’aretz*, 15-07-2005

practice, public discourse and popular representation— form the fundamental texture in which different Israeli social actors have inscribed their politics of trauma.

The costs of the evacuation

At this stage of our analysis, we have to further complicate our problematization of the moral economy of the evacuations and try to understand its twofold nature. In fact, one of the grounds on which is based the struggle between actors displaying their moral conception of the evacuations and their related political actions is that of defining what is the “good” and “bad government” of the disengagement. Both these are articulated within a broader moral economic framework which employs the common language of the *costs of the evacuation* from Gaza.

At first glance, governing the disengagement may seem a common ground of encounter only for those who ultimately support of the evacuation in spite of its “traumatic nature” and who want to take part in a discussion on the best administrative, bureaucratic and operational practices to implement it. This accepts the fact that an evacuation must take place. But, as we will see, the discussion on the good and bad government of the disengagement progressively involved also those –settlers and not– who initially objected to and boycotted the evacuation, and, at a later stage, started to challenge –mainly through public advocacy and legal actions– the state and the actors who implemented the evacuations on the basis that the evacuation from Gaza was “badly governed”.

Here, what is relevant to our reflection is that the language of costs –the *costs of the evacuation*– epitomizes a double register in the moral economy of the evacuation: a monetary-economic one –administering the material costs of the evacuation and the compensation system set up for the evacuees by the state– and a non-monetary-economic one –administering the trauma and the psychological effects of the evacuation. These two levels can hardly be separated in our analysis, since the struggles surrounding the *costs of the evacuation* and those surrounding the trauma of the disengagement are tied to one another. Governing the disengagement is exactly the way in which the different actors came together, spoke about, or clashed, over the proper or improper *oikonomia* of the material and affective costs of the disengagement. If we look more carefully at what happened in the process of administering the dynamics of evacuation and post-evacuation, we find that the monetary economy of the disengagement was subsumed

into the broader moral economy of the evacuations and its regime of settler colonial political morality.

The “Disengagement Administration”

One year before the 2005 evacuation, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced the creation of an *ad hoc* state body for the planning and administration of the disengagement. After the official announcement of the evacuation, the Prime Minister and his cabinet formulated a model of management for the pullout, one with different military, administrative and legal implications. The administrative architecture of the evacuations translated into the creation of SELA (Hebrew acronym for “assistance to the residents of Gaza”), the *Disengagement Administration*, a governmental body temporarily charged with planning and implementing the disengagement in coordination with the Prime Minister’s Office and various Israeli ministries. Very schematically, the temporary administration was responsible for two levels of planning and intervention: a monetary one involving negotiation of monetary compensations for material loss relating to the disengagement with the 1700 settler families –and the private companies which, in coordination with the state, had taken part in the “colonization in depth” of the Gaza Strip¹²–; and a non monetary form of aid consisting in socio-psychological assistance to settlers during the evacuation operation and their relocation in new accommodations set up by the government.

From its inception, the Disengagement Administration became one of the central grounds of struggle between government and settlers. A consistent portion of the settlers refused to engage in any kind of negotiation with SELA as a sign of protest. As an attorney of the *Legal Forum for the Land of Israel* –a right-wing Zionist NGO active in the defense of the “human rights of the settlers” who stood up for the settlers against SELA and its assessment of settler properties– stated on the eve of the evacuation, after the rejection by the Supreme Court of Israel of one of his petitions against the creation of SELA: “The idea was to show [the court, thus the state] that we do not accept the legitimacy of throwing us out of our homes”¹³.

¹² For instance the Israeli Electric Company, reimbursed by SELA in 2008 for losses resulting from the destruction of its electric infrastructures
<http://www.globes.co.il/serveen/globes/docview.asp?did=1000405452>

¹³ <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/katif-heads-to-start-talking-to-disengagement-administration-1.162270>

Parallel to the settler boycott against SELA, some organizations invoked psychological support for the evacuees. In 2004 the Israeli Social Workers and Union of Psychologists proposed to the government a plan of psychological assistance to the Gaza settlers. The Knesset rejected the plan, since the settlers refused to interact directly with the government and its disengagement mechanisms –thus refusing all forms of assistance as sign of rejection of the evacuation *per se*.

Broadly speaking, the settlers reproached Prime Minister Ariel Sharon for using the Disengagement Administration as an instrument for splitting the settler community and obtaining consensus for the evacuation. But, besides these political accusations, it is interesting to note that the claims of the settlers were grounded on monetary compensation from the very inception of the SELA process. Indeed, from the beginning of the evacuation planning process, the destiny of the monetary mechanism devised by the state was subsumed into a broader discourse *on* and *of* trauma. In December 2004, the Legal Forum for the Land of Israel had already warned the government that: “[It should do] everything in its power to see to it that the communities stay together, wherever they are relocated. Every significant study, especially those regarding what happened when people were moved from Sinai [an explicit reference to the 1987 special issue of the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*] indicates that keeping communities intact helps to prevent post traumatic stress disorder, which can result in serious emotional disability”¹⁴. Hence, governing the disengagement seemed to involve struggling within its very specific affective regime. In fact, the political ecology of the disengagement proved more complicated than a quick and unambiguous negotiation between settlers and state on the material costs of evacuation. What was at stake was a much more complex order of morality concerning the place of the event in the Zionist conception of history.

The costs of the encounter

As we have seen, many settlers refused to negotiate the material price of the disengagement as a way of refusing the “rules of the game” regulating *the costs of the evacuation*. Given this framework of pre-evacuation “no-contact policy”, the only possible encounter between the settlers and the state was that between the tens of thousands of soldiers and the police involved in the physical implementation of the evacuation. This encounter was a key moment in the politics of trauma of the evacuation. The boycott of

¹⁴<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/88678#.UIB9da7WTNQ>

the monetary discussion by many settlers as a sign of “moral integrity” paved the way for another kind of interaction:

The nature of the encounter between the soldiers and the settlers was revealing. Before the events, the soldiers received training and rationales in order to withstand the mental stress of facing the settlers. They were to deaden their senses, or at least their reactions, and absorb passively whatever logical arguments or foul language the settlers would throw at them. Their only response was to refer the settlers to the decisions of the political authorities. To the annoyance and open anger of the settlers, their attempts to persuade their interlocutors met an impenetrable blockade, without responding subjects on whom they could exercise their discursive strategies. In response, the settlers attempted to “reindividualize” the soldiers standing in front of them –they wanted the soldiers to see themselves as being responsible for their actions. They called specific male and female soldiers by name, alternately luring and threatening them. They sobbed to the troops that the soldiers were war criminals hiding behind anonymity like the Nazis before them (Freige 2009: 267-268).

If, on the one hand, the majority of the settlers –complying with their line of boycott– rejected any kind of preparation for this encounter, including governmental mental health preparations, on the other hand, the Israeli army provided its soldiers with some mental health training, in view of the physical implementation of the evacuation and the encounter with the settlers. The pre-evacuation mental training consisted of a sort of moral-political preparation of the soldiers:

A month-long orientation program which included the following two main elements: (1) reviewing, discussing, and reinforcing the democratic values of as well as the legal aspects inherent in the particular political situation the country was facing; and (2) simulation exercises to anticipate every possible development in the evacuation process. The first element contributed to the legitimation of the task, which was atypical in a military context and, moreover, was to be carried out in a situation of absence of a political consensus. The second element involved analyzing and resolving conflict solutions vis-à-vis a civilian population of men, women, and families with children. Exercises in various types of behaviors and responses were carried out, including using the right wording to try to persuade and calm the evacuees. The task demanded both sensitivity and assertiveness (Gilbar, Ben-Zur, Lubin 2010: 549-550).

The echo of the encounter between soldiers and settlers, and the nature of the psychological preparation received by the soldiers and police in order to make the settlers accept the “cost of the evacuation”, would occupy a relevant position in the post-evacuation debates and struggles conducted through the register of the politics of trauma. In 2008, after an investigation undertaken by a team of scholars and psychologists sympathizing with the evacuees, a complaint was sent to the Ethics Committee of the Israeli Board of Psychologists against two of the psychologists who

took part in the *Mental Preparations for the Disengagement Mission* –the kit distributed by the Israeli Army to its soldiers on the eve of the disengagement– and the other procedures for preparing the mental health of the soldiers. Some excerpts from the complaint submitted to the Israeli Board of Psychologists can help us understand another important chapter in the articulation of the politics of trauma during the Gaza disengagement: “The expulsion of the Jews from twenty-one settlements in the Gaza Strip and four settlements in northern Shomron [northern West Bank], and the transformation of these settlements into piles of destruction, was a calamity for those who were expelled, a blow for those faithful to the return to Zion, and a national trauma for Israel and the entire Jewish nation”. As we said, the register of the politics of trauma is articulated by different actors in terms of “destruction of the homeland”, a settler-national calamity. The report-complaint continues: “How was the IDF [the Israeli Army] transformed into an army of expulsion? [...] It was done by releasing the soldiers from their conscience, by carrying out exercises in “emotional disconnect”, so that they would be transformed into obedient robots”. A long series of interviews and enquiries on the nature of these preparations, combined with the analysis of an article –“The Disengagement Mission. A Look from Within”– published by the two psychologists who collaborated with the army in the pre-evacuation period, resulted in an accusation of “brainwashing” against the army and the state and pushed the authors of the report to the following conclusion:

The psychologists instituted a silent revolution within the army, without the knowledge of the soldiers and the citizens of Israel. The IDF [the army] was transformed from a protecting fighting force into a postmodern army. [...] The IDF became an army which instead of concentrating and protecting the citizens of the country and fighting the enemy centered its attention on expulsion of citizens and destroying their homes. The soldiers were told that if the army did not succeed in the mission of expulsion, the result would be tantamount to the destruction of the “Third Temple”¹⁵.

The “cost of the evacuation” is depicted as traumatic for the history of the Jewish people, and the “trauma of the evacuation” is conceived as a potential dissolution of the foundations of the settler colonial citizenship. Fundamentally, one of the effects of the moral economy of the evacuation is precisely that of extending to the whole political and moral community a specific suffering associated with the potential end of the settler colonial project.

¹⁵ <http://www.israelbehindthenews.com/bin/content.cgi?ID=3842&q=1>

State word

Once we have understood the relevance of such debates and tensions for our broader reflection on the politics of trauma we have to continue exploring the political field of force we defined as the *costs of the evacuation* and its inherent moral economy in relation to other dynamics that went on after the Gaza pullout. The debate and the practices related to the “administration of the evacuation” progressively included other new actors, further expanding the field of force of the *costs of the evacuation* far beyond the reductionist polarization of state vs settlers.

Immediately after the evacuation, various Zionist Israeli NGOs and non-governmental actors progressively entered the debate and continued to attack SELA –the Disengagement Administration– and the government on different fronts, rearticulating their traumatic register and readapting it to the post-evacuation setting. Some newspaper articles based on information gathered through these non-governmental organizations reported on the “governmental mismanagement” of the evacuation as follows:

Mere days before the date of evacuation, however, SELA authorities realized that the 1,000 hotel rooms they had reserved [in Israel, for the evacuees] were insufficient for the 1,700 families that were to be moved out: 2,500 were necessary. [...] There were no government-provided social workers on the scene at the various hotels to assist with the trauma of relocation and to give practical logistical advice¹⁶.

Warning of the risk of a “humanitarian disaster” –a notion used by some settler spokespersons already during the evacuation– some civil society organizations, individuals, and NGOs such as the Legal Forum for the Land of Israel and *Lem’an Achai* (“For my brothers”, an NGO working in the field of mental care) mobilized and provided various forms of assistance to the evacuees. These organizations –in spite of their harsh critiques against the governmental Disengagement Administration– coordinated with it in order to facilitate accommodation of the evacuees in hotels, school dormitories, caravans and tents.

Lem’an Achai delivered immediate psychological assistance and counseling to the evacuees, while launching an emergency campaign in their support. Immediately after the evacuation, the Chairperson of the NGO launched the initiative with a critical open letter to the Israeli civil society:

¹⁶ Kushner A., “The Situation of the Evacuees from Katif”, Israel Resource News Agency, Sep. 06 2005, <http://www.israelbehindthenews.com/bin/content.cgi?ID=2325&q=1>

9,000 Israeli citizens have become displaced persons overnight. [...] Many are still wearing the clothes they were evicted in. [...] Friends, it is our privilege to help them come to terms with their trauma and begin to rebuild their lives. [...] The Government Disengagement Authority (SELA) and the Statutory Welfare Services, who are technically responsible for the care of the evacuees, have already proven themselves to be incapable or uninterested in providing effective care. [...] Lema'an Achai will now use our expertise to separately provide mental health and crisis services to the evacuees of Gush Katif.¹⁷

Concurrently with these advocacy initiatives, the Legal Forum for the Land of Israel and other legal organizations continued to denounce “governmental negligence” through legal actions and constant monitoring. The main accusation of negligence revolved around a general governmental lack of compassion for the evacuees: “Official sensitivity to the humanitarian needs of the displaced residents is non-existent”¹⁸. The initiatives in support of the evacuees translated into a regular media coverage focusing on “how badly” the situation of the evacuees had been managed by the state authorities. Many media reported on the “issue of the evacuees” through the double register of trauma and lack of compensation for the evacuees housed in caravans and other temporary forms of accommodation. The pressure of these initiatives against “governmental humanitarian and operational negligence” resulted in the creation –in February 2009 by the newly-established Netanyahu government– of an *ad hoc* State Commission of Inquiry charged with evaluating the *Authorities’ treatment of the evacuees of Gush Katif* [the name of the settlements’ block in Gaza] and *Samaria* [the West Bank].

The commission led by the deputy president emeritus of the Supreme Court –the highest judicial body in Israel– and by two other members, released its final report in June 2010. The report, which expressed a harsh condemnation of treatment of the evacuees by the state institutions allows us to further grasp the settler colonial nature of the state and, more fundamentally, another key level of the moral economy of the evacuations. The report condemned the way the state handled the evacuation, highlighting a series of “governance problems”, such as the lack of pre-evacuation communication between settlers and state; mismanagement of the community relocations; and – entering the debate on the “good” and “bad forms of government”– the Commission diplomatically criticized Ariel Sharon’s choice of SELA as the administrative body for the evacuations:

¹⁷ Lem’an Achai, Emergency Campaign for Gush Katif, public appeal published on Israel Resource News Agency, Aug. 22 2005 <http://www.israelbehindthenews.com/bin/content.cgi?ID=2304&q=1>

¹⁸ “Eviction through negligence”, Israel Resource News Agency, Aug. 24 2005, <http://www.israelbehindthenews.com/bin/content.cgi?ID=2312&q=1>

The commission believes that the decision to establish SELA administration as one entity that centralizes the handling of all matters connected with the evacuees –was the right one. [...] However, because of the SELA administration’s lack of experience in settlement related matters, *the task of resettling the evacuees should have been implemented by the Settlement Division [of the World Zionist Organization]*. (STATE COMMISSION FINAL REPORT 2011)

Administration of the evacuation is inscribed by the commission of inquiry within the competence framework of the highest existing Zionist body –the World Zionist Organization–, identified as the most competent institution for dealing with Zionist matters related to settling and unsettling the “land of Israel” –and their morality.

In parallel and together with the identification of the best possible bodies to handle any future evacuations, the report discussed the issue of the costs of the disengagement and praised the efforts of non-governmental organizations like the Legal Forum for the Land of Israel (or Lem’an Achai) in alleviating the suffering of the evacuees. The monetary and moral costs are taken to be interdependent:

The commission also criticized the prolonged stay in transitory residences of hotels [...] which caused the evacuees great suffering and also cost the state treasury a great deal of money. The commission praised social organizations and volunteers that mobilized to help the evacuees during this difficult time and ease their suffering. (STATE COMMISSION FINAL REPORT 2011)

The commission report continued by recommending that the state, in the case of future evacuations, create a team of experts and “professionals, at least some of whom have a connection to socio-psychological treatment in crisis and disaster situations [and] combine the rehabilitation [of the evacuees, called “rehabilitees”] with a general national objective, such as strengthening settlement in [and transferring the evacuees] areas of national priority”. The “areas of national priority” include –according to the list released by the Netanyahu government in 2009– those areas of Israel with a major demographic presence of Palestinians and the main colonies’ blocks in the West Bank. Thus, one of the suggestions of the state commission, expressed in the form of a policy recommendation, is to compensate the “injury” of the evacuations by increasing and strengthening colonization of other priority territories for the nation –colonization as rehabilitation: re-engagement after disengagement, somehow similarly to what happened after the disengagement from Sinai.

These policy recommendations are not surprising if we consider them in light of the broader semantic and moral framework in which the commission of enquiry inscribed its

final report. In fact the members of the commission resorted to a vocabulary of metaphors related to the semantic and discursive field of suffering. Talking about the “identity crisis” of the settlers –described in the report as “pioneers exiled from their homes” uprooted from a “blossoming region” (the occupied Gaza Strip)– the juridical experts overlapped their technical and normative recommendations with an affective register: “Contrary to their beliefs and their life plans, with a seething heart and melancholy soul, choked with tears of grief, humiliation and pain, the settlers evacuated bustling settlements”. The panel of judges portrayed the settlers as victims of a cumulative trauma:

They contended with an unstable security situation and for years they bore the brunt of the shelling, attacks by terrorists, attacks on the roads and all kinds of calamities. The price was high [...] but their spirit never flagged. The scars of their bodies strengthened their commitment [to colonization]. [...] Gush Katif was a unique region. [...] The settlers took upon themselves national missions [such as] making the region bloom [and] absorbing large numbers of immigrants [new settlers]. The evacuation hurt all of these. [...] People who perceived themselves as implementing Zionism ostensibly became a burden and a millstone. [...] The sense of betrayal experienced by the evacuated settlers was shared by more than a few among the general population of Israel. [...] It was a shining page of civics in the annals of the state, when [...] the settlers behaved with responsibility and restraint, with the aim of avoiding a civil war. The heroes of the settlements became the heroes of the evacuation. (STATE COMMISSION FINAL REPORT 2011)

The commission concludes its report saying that it does not intend to take a position on the question of the justice of the disengagement. But a state body composed of members of the Supreme Court, celebrating its settlers as pioneers who “made the desert bloom” – the foundational myth of Zionism– and accusing of disrespect for human rights the settler colonial state that had carried out the evacuation, can hardly be considered a situation in which the justice of the disengagement is not at stake. On the contrary, the report is an illuminating document, a *state word* sanctioning –through the language of “good” and “bad government” of the disengagement– the intrinsic moral justness of Zionism and the settler colonial enterprise. By judging the history of Zionism as an illuminating history of settlement, the commission inscribed the evacuation as a historical wound.

Conclusion

Neither the evacuation from Sinai, nor that from Gaza resulted in the construction of a “decolonized relationship” (Veracini 2010: 106) between Israelis and Palestinians. On the

contrary, both disengagements can be understood as moments in which what is performed by an array of state and non-state actors –from the political analyst to the journalist; from the settler to the scholar; from the prime minister to the parliamentary speaker; from the soldier to the mental health practitioner; from the NGO operator to the Supreme Court judge– is the reaffirmation of the moral justness of the inherent relationship of dispossession on which the settler colonial order is constituted. In the moral economy of settler colonialism trauma is mobilized as a discursive apparatus whose political effect is the disavowal of Israel’s colonial history of settler dispossession started in 1948 with the creation of the state and the re-enactment of the settler colonial project as one of moral justice.

What I have attempted to demonstrate is that one of the constitutive elements in the moral economy of Israel’s settler colonialism is the production of a “moral inversion” – the social construction of settler moral tropes representing the dispossessor as traumatized victim and the evacuation as a settler national trauma– whose ultimate effect is a delimitation of the boundaries of the settler political community, and an effort to avoid a rethinking of the settler colonial relationship and prevent an opening up to the decolonization of Palestine. Fundamentally, the evacuations are moments in which settler colonial dispossession and violence are re-enacted. In fact, the state-led 1982 movement of evacuated Jewish settlers from Sinai to Gaza and the West Bank showed that the settler displacement of the Sinai trauma coincided with the new displacement of the native. More than twenty years later, the 2005 evacuation from the Gaza Strip resulted in the increase of colonial control and humanitarian siege on the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, with the last Israeli military operation –“Pillar of Defense” (November 2012)– legitimized by the Israeli Army also in terms of “trauma prevention” among the Israeli population, hence applying the argument of trauma prevention as an alleged legitimization of the sovereign right to kill the colonized.¹⁹

There is no doubt that an interrogation of dispossession has to analyze the various ways dispossession is systematically put in place on a daily basis, with its different degrees of violence and institutionalization of the regime of inequality that provides the scaffolding of settler colonialism. But when this interrogation is carried out in a context of moral tension between “victorious victims” and “dominated victims” (Darwish 1997: 29), the study of the moments of rupture and inversion of this relationship of dispossession can

¹⁹ Perugini N, “Weaponising trauma: Israel's operation 'Pillar of Defence’”, *Al Jazeera English*, 25 Nov 2012 <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/11/201211251255497766.html>

decisively aid our understanding of both the moments of intense violence which receive a wide media coverage (often without the due historicization of the events) and the very nature of the settler colonial relationship itself in Israel/Palestine.

The inversions I have analyzed embody the will to reproduce –by performing and adopting the peculiar moral economy of settler colonialism I have described– the moral legitimacy of an array of operations of power whose ultimate objective is settling and dispossessing. The multiple protagonists of the evacuations I have focused on are certainly very far from the most widespread images of “the settlers” (religious, fundamentalist, violent, illiberal, living in the occupied West Bank or Golan Heights), but the heuristic value of the operations I have analyzed consists precisely in the fact that they tell us about a moral economy shared by a conspicuous number of different Israeli social and political actors: one that impedes, within the settler colonial body politic, the conditions for achieving the end of settler colonization.

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