“Neoliberal apartheid”: Challenges for decolonization from South Africa to Palestine (An interview with Andy Clarno)

Chandni Desai

Chandni: Can you tell us about your recent book Neoliberal Apartheid and what it’s about?

Andy: Comparisons between Palestine/Israel and South Africa have been extremely productive, especially for the ways we think about Palestine today. It’s really pushed forward an understanding of Israel as an apartheid state. The comparisons have contributed to the growth and expansion of the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement in profound and important ways. And the example of South Africa has held out the possibility that co-existence based on the recognition of mutual humanity is actually possible. But too many of these comparisons focus on South Africa before 1994 and Palestine/Israel today. In doing so, they emphasize the success of the South African struggle for liberation, but overlook or downplay the limitations of transformation in South Africa today.

*Neoliberal Apartheid* builds on the existing critiques of Israeli apartheid but it draws the comparison into the present by looking at Palestine and South Africa after 1994. It starts by trying to address a paradox: since the early 1990s, South Africa went through a triumphant transition to democracy while the Oslo “peace process” has simply entrenched Israeli settler colonial domination over all of Palestine. But over the same time period, both South Africa and Palestine/Israel have gone through quite similar social and economic changes. We see vast inequality in both places, entrenched racialized poverty, and the emergence of advanced security regimes. Why is it that such very different political transitions are coupled with such similar social and economic changes? That is what the book tries to address.

Based on 15 years of research in South Africa and Palestine/Israel, the book focuses on the relationship between settler colonialism and racial capitalism. More specifically, it analyses
the ways that “peace processes” that sought the decolonization of settler colonial states were articulated with the neoliberalization of racial capitalist regimes. In South Africa, the end of formal apartheid was a major political transition, but neoliberal restructuring has entrenched the racial capitalist system and placed severe limitations on transformation and decolonization. In Palestine, on the other hand, the Oslo process has involved an intensification of Israel’s aggressive settler colonial project combined with the neoliberalization of its racial capitalist system. Together, this has transformed Palestinians into a truly disposable population. The book goes into detail about what this means through grounded ethnographic studies of the precariousness of life for poor Black South Africans in Alexandra township, the relationship between neoliberalization and colonization in Bethlehem, the privatization of security in post-apartheid South Africa, and the regime of security coordination between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank.

Your book does an examination of the security regimes in post-apartheid South Africa and post-Oslo Palestine. How does looking at the security regimes and the neoliberalization of these economies enable you to then develop this argument or the concept of neoliberal apartheid?

Too many studies of neoliberalism miss the fundamental importance of securitization within neoliberal projects. Neoliberalism is not really about cuts to government spending. It is about cuts in state spending on social services like education and healthcare. At the same time, neoliberal restructuring almost always involves an increase in state spending on security forces, such as police, prisons, border security, militaries, intelligence agencies, and surveillance. And state spending on security happens alongside the expansion of private security companies, private military companies, and private intelligence companies contracting with states and elites to protect the interests of the powerful.

And this is not coincidental. In the context of growing inequality, high rates of unemployment, and concentrated racialized poverty, neoliberal apartheid regimes like Israel and South Africa rely on advanced, sophisticated security regimes to protect the powerful and police the racialized poor.

The security regimes that are emerging in South Africa and Palestine/Israel are among the most advanced in the world. In South Africa, private security has been the fastest growing industry in the country since the early 1990s. Private security companies work hand in hand with residents’ associations in wealthy neighborhoods to police the presence of poor Black South Africans in wealthy neighborhoods. They have developed what ultimately amounts to a privatized form of apartheid policing. In Palestine, the Oslo process enabled Israel to supplement its direct military rule over the occupied territories with aspects of indirect rule carried out through a regime of security coordination. This regime involves the coordination of operations between the Israeli military and the Palestinian Authority security forces. After the second intifada, the Palestinian Authority security forces underwent a process called “security sector reform” overseen by the United States. Through this process, newly recruited Palestinian security
officers were taken to Jordan and trained by the U.S. using the same facilities and the same private contractors that were used to train the new Iraqi army after 2003. These newly trained Palestinian security forces were then brought back to the West Bank and deployed throughout the scattered Palestinian enclaves. They operate in close coordination with the Israeli military, working hand-in-hand to suppress all forms of resistance to the Israeli occupation and the Oslo process.

The concept of neoliberal apartheid emerges out of looking at the relationship between marginalization and securitization. It involves a combination of extreme inequality, racialized marginalization, concentrated racialized poverty, and advanced regimes of securitization. That combination is what I call neoliberal apartheid.

*What theoretical interventions is your book trying to make specifically in understanding the social relations of settler colonialism and racial capitalism?*

The revival of settler colonial studies has been extremely important, especially in understanding Palestine. The emphasis on Patrick Wolfe’s conceptualization of the “logic of elimination” has drawn attention to the fact that settler colonial regimes often prioritize the land rather than the labour of the colonized population. This has been helpful for scholars and activists wanting to make clear that the problem in Palestine is not just the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but the entire Zionist settler colonial project of displacement and dispossession. The framework of settler colonialism is helpful for drawing connections between the oppression of Palestinians in the 1948 territories, the military occupation of the 1967 territories, and the forced exile of Palestinian refugees in the diaspora.

Nevertheless, South Africa sits rather uncomfortably in this new literature on settler colonialism because the exploitation of Black labour was fundamentally important to the white supremacist settler colonial project. Until the late 1800s, when diamonds and gold were discovered, the settler colonial project in South Africa was largely about driving the Indigenous population away and taking control of their lands. But with the discovery of diamonds and gold, there was suddenly a massive demand for low wage labour. As such, Black South Africans were hounded into native reserves (later called Bantustans) and forced to work for extremely low wages in the mines as well as factories and farms. But the exploitation of Black labour didn’t replace or eliminate the settler colonial demand for land. Instead, it intensified settler colonial expansion as more white settlers came to the country in search of wealth and fortune. South Africa helps us recognize that it is important to not oversimplify the relationship between elimination and exploitation. Instead of assuming that settler colonial regimes are about eliminating rather than exploiting Indigenous populations, we need to pay close attention to the relationship between elimination and exploitation, exclusion and exploitation, within settler colonial projects. And this leads me back to the concept of racial capitalism.

During the late 1970s and 1980s, Black radicals in South Africa rejected the simplistic definition of apartheid as a regime of racial domination that could be eliminated by achieving
legal equality. Instead, they argued that apartheid was a system of racial capitalism and that racism and capitalism must be confronted together. Otherwise, they predicted, the post-apartheid state would remain extremely unequal and divided. The South African transition of the last 20 years has lent a lot of support to their analysis. At the same time, in the early 1980s, Cedric Robinson was developing his analysis of racial capitalism and insisting that capitalism has always been a racialized system. There is no such thing as non-racial capitalism. I draw on both of these traditions to analyze the neoliberal restructuring of racial capitalist regimes in South Africa and Israel. And I trace the articulation between neoliberalization and efforts to transform or decolonize settler colonial regimes: the democratization project in South Africa and the Oslo project in Palestine. Those projects took very different directions. Oslo simply entrenched Israel’s settler colonial project, the conquest of land, and racial domination. In South Africa, the settler state was democratized and Black South Africans gained formal legal equality. But there was very little attention to the question of racial inequality or the question of land, most of which still remains in the hands of the old white elite. I try to address those relationships in the book.

What lessons do we learn from the failure of decolonization in South Africa or the so called “peace process” in Palestine? How might those lessons resonate or influence social movements today?

I hope it can do three things. First, it can help us take seriously the limitations of transformation in South Africa, rather than treating the South African transition as a model to be replicated in Palestine. In brief, we can say that apartheid didn’t end in South Africa, it was transformed into a neoliberal apartheid regime. Land and wealth are still concentrated in the hands of the old white elite. And the new Black elite has adopted and reproduced many of the forms of exclusion that characterized the old regime. Social movements in South Africa today are challenging neoliberal policies, calling for land redistribution, and demanding the decolonization and de-commodification of higher education. I think it is important to recognize that these struggles continue in South Africa.

Second, it’s important to see the ways that Israel’s settler colonial project operates through neoliberalism. From the beginning, the Oslo project was articulated with the neoliberal restructuring of the Israeli economy and with the U.S government’s neoliberal vision for the Middle East as a whole. Neoliberal colonization has deepened the marginalization of most Palestinians and, like in South Africa, it has generated a small Palestinian elite that works hand in hand with Israel and the United States. The implications here are multiple. On one hand, it means that eliminating the racist structures of the Israeli state, while absolutely necessary, is not enough to truly liberate Palestine. So it raises questions about how to deepen the critique of racial capitalism within the struggle for liberation. On the other hand, it also raises questions about the role of the Palestinian Authority and obviously the United States empire within Israel’s settler colonial project.
The third thing I hope the book can do is to highlight the fact that these patterns of extreme inequality, racialized poverty, and advanced securitization are not unique to South Africa and Palestine. Rather, similar dynamics are reshaping social relations across the world today. Neoliberal apartheid plays out in specific ways in different contexts, so it is not to say that everything is the same. And Palestine is certainly exceptional in many ways – particularly the active, aggressive colonization by the Israeli state and the settlers. But I hope the book will encourage a deeper recognition of the ways that South Africa and Palestine/Israel are caught up in global processes, which could contribute to further connections between movements confronting racism, capitalism, empire and colonialism. Movements around the world have been building relationships and sharing visions for a different world. And I hope this book can contribute in some small way by helping draw connections between regimes of domination and struggles for liberation today.

Thank you!

Andy Clarno is Associate Professor of Sociology and African American Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research examines racism, capitalism, colonialism, and empire in the early 21st century, with a focus on the relationship between marginalization and securitization. He is the author of the book *Neoliberal Apartheid: Palestine/Israel and South Africa after 1994* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).