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*Improving the Land, Improving the Native*

Property law has often been posited as the sine qua non of development, a proposition that has had particularly devastating consequences for Indigenous peoples in colonial contexts. From colonial Bengal in the 18th century, to the 19th century settlement of Canada and Australia to the 20th century colonisation of Palestine, the development of both native subjects and the land they inhabited required, in the minds of colonists, the imposition of the common law of private property. Today, arguments that the formalisation of land rights are the necessary prerequisite for improving the lives of the poor in the developing world, as put forth by Hernando de Soto, can be seen as the contemporary manifestation of this well-established form of colonial governance. The idea of improvement, which prevailed for centuries as a key rationale for private property ownership, was truly an ideology; it encompassed economic, legal, and philosophical dimensions. While many scholars have critiqued the ideology of improvement as reflecting Eurocentric tendencies of development discourse, I examine how the notion of improvement articulates moments through which modern property logics emerge in conjunction with racial formations. The prevailing ideology of improvement is one that historically has bound together land with its populations; land that was not cultivated for the purposes of contributing to a burgeoning agrarian capitalist economy was, from the early 17th century onwards, deemed to be waste. Whereas wasteland was free for appropriation, those who maintained subsistence modes of cultivation were cast as in need of improvement through assimilation into a civilised (read English) mode of being.

Specifically, in this paper I will examine how the ideology of improvement travels to Palestine, and forms a core dimension of early Zionist settlement activity. I argue that cultivation retains its force largely as an ideological bulwark against challenges to political Zionism that seek to expose its primary claims as recent historiographical inventions. In other words, the history of agricultural settlements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries provides a basis (however thin) for the Zionist narrative of a successful return to the land, a ‘negation of exile’ that was realised through working the land. Through the ideal of agricultural colonisation, Zionist political claims came to have a territorial reality. Despite the fact that cultivation remains more of an ideological phenomenon rather than a reflection of actual economic and social realities on the ground, its status as a flashpoint for contestations over proving entitlement to land remains undiminished. The recent judgment concerning Bedouin land rights in Al-Araqib will be the focal point through which the larger issues outlined herein are examined.