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THE PALESTINIAN'S VENISON: JOHN LOCKE, COLONIALISM AND LIBERAL
ZIONISM

By

Ben Geier

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the thesis requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

The Palestinian's Venison: John Locke, Colonialism and Liberal Zionism

By

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Liberal Zionism is one of the most potent political forces with the American Jewish diaspora, as it allows for Jews living in the U.S. to support a strong Israel while still holding to the liberal values that the majority of American Jews believe in when it comes to domestic politics. Liberal Zionism can seem like a contradiction, but it is rooted in the work of the father of liberalism himself, John Locke. This paper examines portions of Locke's Second Treatise and compares it to the pillars of liberal Zionist thought, showing the parallels between Locke's justification for European colonialism in the Americas with the liberal Zionist's justification for the establishment and continuing maintenance of the State of Israel in Palestine.

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I. Introduction

For more than a century, one political issue has hung over Jewish people worldwide more than any other – the idea of a Jewish state. Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the issue has come into sharper relief. Freed from the shackles of hypotheticals, Jews in the diaspora suddenly had to reckon with the fact that a new country now existed and had been formed at least partially in their name -- and that the formation of this country had been far from bloodless; indeed, it came soaked in controversy and amid accusations of ethnic cleansing. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, (not to mention centuries of pogroms, discrimination and libels), the dominate threads of Jewish thought in the West did not dwell on any potential quibbles. The establishment of Israel was a cause for celebration; indeed, it was the culmination of decades of struggle and millennia of persecution.

History, though, is rarely content to allow this sort of unbridled joy to effervesce for very long. The seven decades since the founding of Israel have been fraught with conflict for the state, both with neighboring Arab states and with the indigenous non-Jews living within its borders. In turn, this has created intellectual conflicts for Jews in the diaspora, especially those living in the United States, which has been among Israel's closest allies through the years. Israel has been a major client for the American defense industry and the pro-Israel lobby growing to become one of the most powerful and controversial domestic political forces in Washington.

While Zionism is often presented as a single ideology, it is better viewed as a collection of ideologies sharing a central theme of Jewish nationalism. Labour Zionism, for instance, is a wholly secular movement which seeks to fuse Jewish nationalism with socialism, believing that “the development of capitalism would inevitably prompt Jews to immigrate to Palestine, and that only there could the economic structure of the Jewish people be reconstituted as a base for the

class struggle of the Jewish proletariat”¹ Religious Zionists, on the other hand find their inspiration in the Torah and believe that only through the Jewish religion can Jewish life and a Jewish identity in Israel truly be established.² There are myriad other forms of Zionism, and one could spend an entire scholarly career sorting through them. Within the Jewish diaspora in the United States, though, there are two broad Zionist movements which drive the debate and conversation, and which will be the focus of this paper: liberal Zionism and conservative Zionism. While these two groups do come in conflict, there is much about which they agree.

Both support a strong state of Israel. Both want to nurture and grow the relationship between Israel and the United States. Both have supported Israel in its many wars and skirmishes, and both ultimately believe the Israeli military acts justly in defending its borders and the nation’s “right to exist.” But there are indeed two sides to this debate. While they may not have major disagreements on policy, they do have major divisions in terms of justification and the intellectual foundations that provide the support for their worldviews.

For conservative Zionists, the formation and continued existence of Israel is merely another episode in the course of humanity. History, after all, is the movement of people. Jewish people had long sought a homeland; after World War II, with the sympathies of the world’s powers finally on their side, they took the opportunity presented to them. Any violence done during Israel’s formation was a necessary piece of collateral damage. Any violence done since then is a relatively normal act of statehood, and Israel is only singled out because of base

¹ “Zionism: Socialist Zionism,” Jewish Virtual Library, accessed May 1 2021, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/socialist-zionism>

² “Zionism: Religious Zionism,” Jewish Virtual Library, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/religious-zionism>

antisemitism that has come to be applied to Israel as a state, making it truly “the Jew among nations.”

While not all of them may ascribe to conservative politics more generally, they certainly take a militarist and chauvinistic approach to this particular issue. It is not hard to see how they justify their support for Israel; it is very similar to the support American conservatives still have for the United States, despite that nation’s early history also being rife with bloodshed and conquest.

Liberal Zionism is exactly what it sounds like; support for the nationalist doctrine of Zionism within a frame of a broader political movement that generally forgoes chauvinistic nationalism in favor of multiculturalism and international cooperation. This can be seen as fundamentally hypocritical. Political theorist Jamie Mayerfeld, for instance, posits that nationalism is inherently violent, and that even the most liberal of nationalisms serves to make ethnic violence a more feasible outcome. He notes that nationalism doesn’t guarantee violence, but makes the potential for conflict more likely; furthermore, he posits that if a violent conflict does break out, engrained nationalism makes it much harder to put an end to that conflict.³

Though there is certainly disagreement on this point – David Miller, for instance, argues that a liberal nationalism can provide the framework for creating just societies and still respect the rights of minorities.⁴ This paper, though, operates on the basis that liberalism and nationalism are inherently in conflict, especially in a situation like the one in Israel, where the nationalist goals of one group – Israeli Jews – are in direct conflict with another national group, Arab Palestinians. Liberal Zionists, therefore, must find an ideological epoxy that allows them to bring

³ Jamie Mayerfeld. "The Myth of Benign Group Identity: A Critique of Liberal Nationalism." *Polity* 30, no. 4 (1998): 557, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3235255>.

⁴David Miller. *Citizenship and National Identity* (United Kingdom: Wiley, 2000)

together a nationalist project with a sincere belief in liberal values. They find that epoxy in the philosophy of the Father of Liberalism himself, John Locke.

No political philosopher is more explicitly tied to the colonial project than Locke. The Englishman wrote extensively about the justification for taking land in his *Second Treatise of Government*⁵, and his words have been used for centuries to justify empire building, particularly early British colonialism. His chapter on property in the Second Treatise makes the case that if a person has not enclosed their land by a fence and performed labor to improve it, they do not own it, and that it can be freely appropriated by another person. Many Locke scholars⁶ read this chapter as an explicit justification for European colonialism in North America, justifying a colonial power coming to a land where the liberal nation-state does not exist and expropriating the resources through establishing borders and a state or through working the land with labor.

By examining the discourse of liberal Zionism from throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, this paper will explore the direct connection between the Lockean defense of colonialism and the liberal Zionist defense of the establishment and maintaining of the State of Israel. Though the settlement and establishing of Israel by European Jews may not mirror the settlement of the Americas by European Christians, they are at a minimum cousin, and as such they find a common ancestor in the writing of Locke. As time has gone on, the liberal Zionist defense of Israel has in many ways shifted. The tall tales of “making the desert bloom” have given way to a celebration of Israel’s impressive tech industry. At its heart, though, the argument

⁵ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1980)

⁶ Barbara Arneil, Jimmy Klausen, and Richard Armitage are all prominent scholars making this reading, and their arguments are explored in this paper.

is the same: Jewish Israeli's took a barren, empty land and turned it into a modern liberal state, full of free people future-shaping innovations.

This paper will proceed in four basic steps. First, it will review Locke's colonial theories and explain how they look both on paper and in practice. The second section will look at the history and current state of Zionist discourse, focusing especially on liberal Zionism but also analyzing right wing Zionism to highlight the contrast. The paper will then turn to how Locke's ideas about colonialism fit within the liberal Zionist narrative. Finally, there will be a brief look to the future, examining how liberal Zionism can survive in a political culture that is so eager to declare it dead.

II. Defining Lockean Colonialism

Much of John Locke's defense of colonialism comes from the chapter "Of Property" in his *Second Treatise of Government*. Though this chapter is nominally focused on the property rights that would come to define much of liberal democracy, there is much in the chapter that implicitly defends the colonialism of European powers, including Locke's native England. Some Locke scholars posit that Locke's purpose in this chapter was specifically to justify English colonialism:

By taking seriously Locke's repeated references to America in the *Second Treatise*, it can be shown that the *Two Treatises* were written as a defence of England's colonial policy in the new world against the sceptics in England and the counter-claims of both the aboriginal nations and other European powers in America ... the famous chapter on property, which contains most of the references to American *Indians* in the *Two Treatises*, was written to justify the seventeenth-century dispossession of the aboriginal peoples of their land, through a vigorous defence of England's 'superior' claims to proprietorship.⁷

⁷ Barbara Arneil, *John Locke and America: The Defence of English Colonialism*. (Oxford University Press, 1996), 1-2

In theory, the chapter is simply about land relations between individuals. Locke does, after all, care about the idea of property. But it is important to consider the context in which Locke writes. One of the major examples he uses is the “wild Indian, who knows no enclosure”⁸ Locke may be writing about a lone man appropriating a piece of land to be used for his benefit, but it is clear that the same logic can be (and has been) used to justify the taking of land in the Americas which has not been enclosed and claimed by the native people already there when English settlers arrived.

There are two basic steps to claiming land in Locke’s view; enclosure and labor – with labor specifically meaning agrarian cultivation.⁹ Before these two steps are taken, all land is held in common by mankind. This means that anything found on land that has not been cultivated is available to all, including the native people of the Americas: “The fruit, or venison, which nourishes the wild Indian, who knows no enclosure, and is still a tenant in common, must be his, and so his, i.e. a part of him, that another can no longer have any right to it, before it can do him any good for the support of his life.”¹⁰ Once a man does do put in the labor to cultivate land, though, it ceases to be part of the commons and becomes private piece of property: “As much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates and can use the product of, so much is his property. He by his labour does, as it were, inclose it from the common.”¹¹ As Arneil and others note, while on the surface this seems to be about a homesteader claiming land for himself or his family on a frontier, the colonial interpretation also makes sense, especially given Locke’s work as a colonist, which will be discuss shortly. He is essentially saying that because the indigenous

⁸ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 19

⁹ Arneil, *John Locke and America: The Defence of English Colonialism*, 271

¹⁰ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 19

¹¹ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 21

people of America did not cultivate the land to the standard of European nations, it is still part of the earth's commons and is free for appropriation by another nation if that nation were to do the requisite labor and enclosure.

Arneil notes that Locke does not rest his justifications for settlement and colonization on some idea of the superiority of the Englishman over the Indian or a belief in spreading Christianity; rather his theory is simply that anyone who cultivates and works land is more entitled to it than a person who simply hunts or gathers on it.

The doctrine of natural rights allows that anyone may lay claim to the soil of America if he adopts a settled agrarian style of life, joins the rest of mankind in the use of money and commerce, establishes laws of liberty and property, and adopts the primary principle of God, and the secondary principles of arts and sciences as the basis of knowledge.¹²

In a sense, Locke sanitizes the brutality of settler-colonialism by couching it in the idea that the Indians who are seeing their land seized and their way of life halted could have prevented this if they had simply lived up to the standard that he lays out. He explicitly spells this out, noting that the land in the Americas “are rich in land, and poor in the comforts of life”¹³ and notes that the New World has “a fruitful soil, apt to produce in abundance, what might serve for food, raiment, and delight; yet for want of improving it by labour have not one hundredth part of the conveniences we enjoy.”¹⁴ He also writes that even the king of a large territory in the Americas “feeds, lodges, and is clad worse than a day-labourer in England.”¹⁵ Locke is clear that because the Natives to the land in the Americas have not cultivated it, established property conventions,

¹² Ibid

¹³ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 25

¹⁴ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 25-26

¹⁵ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 26

and begun to adopt modern liberal democracy, the land is able to be claimed by a group of people who have, in this case Englishmen.

The notion that land must be put to good use is pervasive in Locke's discourse. An unsettled, uncultivated land is wasted, mostly from an economic but also from a moral and political standpoint. Jimmy Klausen writes that Locke sees "an America whose open, vacant expanses invite the possibility of original, founding consent—new political compacts among likeminded individuals who have escaped their fathers' 'constituted and ancient polities.'"¹⁶ Klausen understands Locke as believing that the open space available in the Americas represents a place where new political avenues can be explored and where men who are not content with the system of government they are living under in England can use the open, available space to create a new system with a new social covenant. This is also the argument used in American mythology — the idea that the Pilgrims came to the New World because they were seeking a new order, and that later American colonists sought a new political system free from the tyranny of the monarchy, leading to the American Revolution. Arneil notes that Locke also posits a strong economic rationale for colonialism, arguing that a robust colonial program in the Americas will create wealth and opportunity for people in England and ultimately be beneficial to the national economy. Locke, she says, argues that colonialism "far from draining England of employment, creates far more jobs through demand for the necessary manufactured tools and the development of shipping necessary to transport them."¹⁷ This argument also extends to the building of ships and the increased employment in the shipping industry in England.¹⁸ Locke

¹⁶ Jimmy Casas Klausen. "Room Enough: America, Natural Liberty, and Consent in Locke's Second Treatise." *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 3 (2007): 761, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2007.00573.x>

¹⁷ Arneil, *John Locke and America*, 603

¹⁸ Arneil, *John Locke and America*, 604

also enters into an economic argument when discussing how the use of money is part of establishing society.¹⁹

Locke's colonial justification in the *Second Treatise* can be read as even more focused than simply justifying all European colonial activity in the new world, but as specifically defending a manner of colonization which would allow for appropriation of land without consideration of the existing people there. Richard Tuck reads the *Second Treatise* as countering the narrative being built in the English colony in Pennsylvania, founded by William Penn in 1681. He writes that in Pennsylvania could be found "all the things which Locke was attacking in the *Second Treatise*: that is, the absolutism of Penn's frame of government and his treatment of the Indians as the rightful possessors of their land, which even chartered colonists had to buy from them."²⁰ To Locke, this didn't make sense – the Indians had not enclosed or cultivated their land in the same way as Europeans, so they had no rightful ownership of it. Here, we see an interesting wrinkle to Locke's liberalism – the idea of respecting an alternate method of political organization as equal to the European nation-state is unthinkable. On the other hand, as Uday Mehta has pointed out, it is Edmund Burke – the "father of conservatism" – who was critical of British imperialism.²¹ This is a contrast worthy of a fuller explanation than is possible here. Still, it is curious to see that, in this reading of Locke, absolutism is compatible with respect for native people while liberalism is intimately tied to colonialism expropriation.

The *Second Treatise* is not a tract explicitly about justifying colonial expansion. As this section has shown, though, his words were absolutely designed to serve as a support beam for the

¹⁹ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 28-29

²⁰ David Armitage, "John Locke, Carolina and the Two Treatises of Government," *Political Theory* 32, no. 5 (2004), 605, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591704267122>

²¹ Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 2018)

colonial house European powers were beginning to build at the time of the writing. For the following century, the ideas found in Locke's work would be key in justifying continued expansion of European empire.

Locke, though, was not merely a political philosopher; he was a practitioner, notably cowriting the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina in 1669 with his mentor Lord Ashley.²² This document, written as part of a series of documents meant to lay out the governance of the Carolina colony, is often read by scholars as another brick in the building of colonial justification. David Armitage notes that “no major political theorist before the nineteenth century so actively applied theory to colonial practice as Locke did by virtue of his involvement with writing the Fundamental Constitutions of the Carolina colony.”²³ Voltaire even said to “cast your eyes over the other hemisphere, behold Carolina, of which the wise Locke was the legislator.”²⁴ The Constitutions set up a system of governance and land ownership in the Carolina colonies that fits with the established notions of Lockean colonialism.

The 110th article of the Constitution gives slaveowners ultimate power over their slaves.²⁵ This ties back to the Second Treatise, where Locke writes in his fourth Chapter, “Of Slavery,” that slavery is “nothing else, but the state of war continued, between a lawful conqueror and a captive”²⁶ Locke also smuggles a justification for master-slavery relations into the chapter on property:

²² Vicki Hsueh, “Giving Orders: Theory and Practice in the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, No.3 (July 2002), 427: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3654316>

²³ Armitage, “John Locke, Carolina and the Two Treatises of Government,” 603

²⁴ Armitage, “John Locke, Carolina and the Two Treatises of Government,” 607

²⁵ “The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina: March 1, 1669,” The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, accessed May 1, 2021, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/nc05.asp

²⁶ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 17

Thus the grass my horse has bit; the turfs my servant has cut; and the ore I have digged in any place, where I have a right to them in common with others, become my *property*, without the assignation or consent of any body. The *labour* that was mine, removing them out of that common state they were in, hath *fixed* my *property* in them.²⁷

This passage puts a person's "servants" on the same plane as their horse, establishing the slave as property and, essentially, a tool.; just as a freeman is entitled to the fruits of any labor done by themselves or their horse, so are they to the fruits of any labor done by their slaves. In the 112th article of the Constitution, Locke defines how land will be distributed to individuals in Carolina:

No person whatever shall hold or claim any land in Carolina by purchase or gift, or otherwise, from the natives, or any other whatsoever, but merely from and under the lords proprietors, upon pain of forfeiture of all his estate, movable or immovable, and perpetual banishment.²⁸

Here, Locke is clearly establishing that the land in the colony is rightfully "owned" by the lords proprietors, in a way recreating the European system. He established it as illegal to purchase land from the Natives, because in his schema they have no right to the land in the first place. The lords proprietors, on the other hand, had appropriated the land as Locke prescribes in the Second Treatise, and therefore have the right to distribute it amongst the people as they see fit.

Locke's *Second Treatise* can be read as a justification for centuries of European colonization in the Americas and, later, throughout the world. The application of this colonial defense has generally been for traditional imperialism – a European power going to a less-developed land and creating a colony. The same logic, though, can be used for less formal colonial projects – such as the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

²⁷ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 19-20

²⁸ "The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina: March 1, 1669"

III. Defining the Zionist Debate

The previous section of this paper laid the groundwork for defining and understanding John Locke's theory of colonialism; this section will do the same for several of the basic theories of Zionism. This section is hardly meant to be all-encompassing, as several volumes could (and have been) written detailing exactly what Zionism is and how the various strains of it intersect and diverge. Rather, two of the most important strains of Zionist thought (especially in the United States) will be laid out, dissected and put in perspective with one another.

The first strain of Zionist thought to consider is, for the purpose of this paper, being called "conservative Zionism." Note that this does not necessarily mean that all believers or practitioners of conservative Zionism are conservative when it comes to other political issues or in their overall worldview, simply that they believe in a conservative approach to issues in Israel and in appraising Israeli action, especially against the Palestinians and other Arab neighbors of Israel.

Conservative Zionism is a fundamentally chauvinistic and militaristic worldview. Like other conservative approaches to foreign policy, it owes much to the realist school of international relations. Realists believe that states are constantly in security competition with one another and will do anything possible to gain an upper hand against rivals, or to gain more power for themselves.²⁹ For conservative Zionists, there is a slight twist to this formula – the state in question is an ethno-state, and the state apparatus doesn't necessarily act in defense of all the state's citizens, instead working on behalf of the dominant group, in this case Jews. To conservative Zionists, this is not just a fact of life but in fact something to be celebrated.

²⁹ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 17

Consider this passage from a 2003 column written by Ben Shapiro, an American writer who is a right-wing firebrand and one of Israel's most vocal defenders in the press:

Here is the bottom line: If you believe that the Jewish state has a right to exist, then you must allow Israel to transfer the Palestinians and the Israeli-Arabs from Judea, Samaria, Gaza and Israel proper. It's an ugly solution, but it is the only solution. And it is far less ugly than the prospect of bloody conflict ad infinitum. When two populations are constantly enmeshed in conflict, it is insane to suggest that somehow deep-seated ideological change will miraculously occur, allowing the two sides to live together.³⁰

Shapiro, it is worth noting, later backed off of his idea of forcibly transferring Palestinians from their homes, though not without significant pressure from fellow journalists and thinkers. The message in this column, though is clear: Israel should do whatever it takes to win the ongoing conflict between it and the Palestinians, including quite literal ethnic cleansing.³¹ In the same column, Shapiro compares his solution of transfer to Winston's Churchill's decision to transfer ethnic Germans out of the newly recreated Poland in the aftermath of World War II. Churchill, of course, was a conservative through and through, especially on matters of empire, so it is fitting that Shapiro uses him as a justification here.

For American conservative Zionists, there are several religious elements to their philosophy as well. First, it is worthwhile to consider that while this paper is focusing mostly on Zionism within the Jewish community, many non-Jews are Zionists as well. In the realm of conservative Zionists, these are most often evangelical Christians who support Israel for

³⁰ Ben Shapiro, "Transfer is not a dirty word," *Townhall*, August 27, 2003, <https://townhall.com/columnists/benshapiro/2003/08/27/transfer-is-not-a-dirty-word-n976781>

³¹ Shapiro is hardly the only conservative to offer such brutal solutions regarding Israel. Caroline Glick has written an entire book, *The Israeli Solution: A One-State Solution for Peace in the Middle East* (New York: Crown Forum, 2014) advocating for Israel to annex the West Bank and make its Arab residents permanent second-class citizens. Columnists like John Podhoretz and Dennis Prager regularly write about how settlements in the West Bank are not illegal and blame Palestinians almost solely for the ongoing conflict.

eschatological reasons: they believe that by supporting Israel they will bring about Armageddon, the end times and, ultimately, the return of Christ. Though these conservative Christian Zionists are very important and play a big role in the pro-Israel lobby in the United States, their concerns are far more spiritual than political, so they won't be factored in further here.

There is another religious element to conservative Zionism, though: basic American Islamophobia. Especially in the nearly two-decades since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, basic islamophobia has fueled conservative Zionism. This is also one of the most prominent synergies between general conservative thought, especially neoconservatism, and conservative Zionism. The Global War on Terror was cast by many in the conservative movement as a clash of civilizations between the Islamic world and the Western world. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with other skirmishes throughout the middle east, were seen as part of that war. For conservative Zionists, Israel was an important part of this clash. It was seen as an “outpost of Western civilization.”³² Again, Shapiro – who, in addition to being a staunch Zionist, has frequently talked about the important of Western Civilization and of guarding it against outsiders – provides a peephole into the gears of this ideology:

Then, after 9/11, support for Israelis jumped among Republicans and never stopped growing. Conservative Americans, who had been more likely to draw a moral equation between Israel and her enemies, identified with the Israelis — they saw Israel as an outpost of Western civilization in a region rife with Islamic terrorism. They saw Palestinians handing out candies as the World Trade Center towers fell, and they knew that Israelis had been facing down the same threat. The real, meaningful conflict between Islamist barbarism and Western liberalism was thrown into sharp relief.³³

³² Chandra Kumar, “Herzl’s Vision Realized: Israel as ‘Outpost of Western Civilisation in Asia,’ *Palestine Chronicle*, December 12, 2014, <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/herzls-vision-realized-israel-as-outpost-of-western-civilisation-in-asia/>

³³ Ben Shapiro, “Partisan Divide over Israel,” *Jewish Journal*, January 25, 2018, <https://jewishjournal.com/commentary/opinion/ben-shapiro/230014/partisan-divide-israel/>

Ultimately, conservative Zionists see a future in which Israel not only maintains its nature as an ethnically-defined Jewish state, but actually expands its borders and brings more Palestinian Arabs under its dominions. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the avatar in the west for conservative Zionism, has proposed annexing parts of the West Bank – and some even further to his right want to claim all of it.³⁴

On the other side of the Zionist ledger is the strain this paper most concerns itself with: liberal Zionism. Liberal Zionism has morphed throughout the years, but at its core is a belief that while Israel can and should exist as a Jewish state, it should do so in a way that respects religious freedom, ethnic pluralism and other hallmarks of modern liberal society. In recent years, as politics in Israel have drifted even further to the right³⁵ – the right-wing demagogue Netanyahu has been elected nearly half a dozen times, even though he has been the subject of various scandals – this has seemingly become a more difficult circle to square. The next section of this paper will examine how liberal Zionism, from the pre-statehood days until today, have used classic Lockean colonial defenses to do just that. First, though, I look at liberal Zionism as a modern political phenomenon. This paper is generally focused on liberal Zionism in the Jewish diaspora, specifically in the United States. There will be, by necessity, some exploration of the history of liberal Zionism in other parts of the world, including in Israel itself, but the main thrust will be on the way liberal Zionists not living in Israel justify their support of the state.

³⁴ Daniel Estrin, “Netanyahu Plans to Annex Parts of the West Bank. Many Israeli Settlers Want it All,” *NPR*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/18/878305307/netanyahu-plans-to-annex-parts-of-the-west-bank-many-israeli-settlers-want-it-al>

³⁵ Natan Sachs, “Israel’s right-wing majority,” Brookings Institute, April 11, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/04/11/israels-right-wing-majority/>

The “two-state solution” is one of the shibboleths of modern liberal Zionism. This describes the long-championed idea of creating two states in the region as a way to end the ongoing conflict: one Jewish and Israeli, the other Arab and Palestinian. While many observers, generally from a left-wing or Marxist ideology, have come to believe that the two-state solution is impractical at best and impossible at worst,³⁶ for liberal Zionist thinkers and institutions it remains the most important part of their worldview on the issue. J Street, a think tank which “organizes pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans to promote US policies that embody our deeply held Jewish and democratic values and that help secure the State of Israel as a democratic homeland for the Jewish people,”³⁷ makes the idea of a two-state solution a central part of its strategy and branding. The organizations mission statement says that “We believe the Palestinian people, like the Jewish people, have the right to a democratic national home of their own, living side-by-side with Israel in peace, freedom and security.”³⁸ This has an understandable appeal to progressives living in the west who want to support the Jewish state has a representative of a historically oppressed people:

Western progressives believe that the Zionist left genuinely supports a just solution to the “conflict” between Israel and Palestine, as embodied in the peace initiatives brought forth by Labor governments and Zionists Left leaders. The Zionist left has been associated with universalistic values of humanism and democracy which guide its approach toward Palestinian citizens of Israel, and Western progressives accept the idea that the Zionist Left has truly striven to attain civil rights and equality between the Palestinian minority and Jewish Majority in Israel, albeit without compromising on the Jewish identity of the state.³⁹

³⁶ Joshua Leifer, “The two-state solution is a political fiction liberal Zionists still cling to,” *The Guardian*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/14/two-state-solution-political-fiction-liberal-zionists>

³⁷ “Mission & Principals,” J Street, accessed on May 1, 2020, <https://jstreet.org/about-us/mission-principles/#.YGuYr2gpA6U>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Tikvah Honig-Parnass, *False Prophets of Peace: Liberal Zionism and the Struggle for Palestine* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 1

The importance of the state to the legitimization of a nation is one of the central justifications political theorist Michael Walzer uses to defend his liberal Zionism even as the ideology comes under increasing scrutiny. He writes that his Zionism is actually part of a “universal statism” and that he believes that “everybody who needs a state should have one, not only the Jews but also the Armenians, the Kurds, the Tibetans, the South Sudanese – and the Palestinians.”⁴⁰ Walzer admits to the fact that the establishment of Israel has brought its shares of injustices, but – noting that he grew up during World War Two and was alive in America as the Holocaust unfolded in Europe – holds to the belief that the need for a Jewish State is “so urgent that it overrides whatever injustices state hood has brought. We still have to oppose the injustices with all the resources we can muster, but we can’t give up the State.”⁴¹ Walzer calls out some Israeli actions, particularly in the occupied West Bank, noting that liberal Zionists both in Israel and abroad have called out the “cruelties” of the occupation for years, and he notes that he considers himself a “defender of Zionism but not an apologist for what people calling themselves Zionists re doing in Israel today – and were doing yesterday too.”⁴²

Here we see the most distinguishing fact of liberal Zionism: whereas the conservative Zionists discussed above believe Israel should do whatever it takes to achieve security, including ethnic cleansing and military oppression of minorities, the liberal Zionist wants to find a way to create an ethnically-defined Jewish state without violating those taboos – to push for a better

⁴⁰ Michael Walzer, “The State of Righteousness: Liberal Zionists Speak Out,” *HuffPost*, April 24, 2012, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/liberal-zionists-speak-out-state-of-righteousness_b_1447261

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Michael Walzer, “Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism,” *Dissent*, Fall 2019, ⁴²<https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/anti-zionism-and-anti-semitism>

Jewish State. In some ways, liberal Zionists position themselves not just as another way of thinking about the conflict, but as the only bulwark against increasing militarism and reaction in Israel; basically, presenting themselves to the world as the only viable alternative to Netanyahu and his allies. Again, reading the J-Street mission statement provides some clarity:

Criticism of Israeli policy does not threaten the health of the state of Israel — in fact, such criticism and open debate is a key element of any democratic society. Meanwhile, certain Israeli policies (and the silence of too many in the American Jewish establishment when vigorous protest of those policies is necessary) do pose an existential threat to Israel’s future. They deserve to be challenged and opposed by Israel’s supporters — just as we should challenge harmful Palestinian actions and policies that exacerbate conflict or make peace harder to achieve.

Endless settlement expansion, creeping annexation, and the enforcement of occupation violate international law, trample on Palestinian rights and push Israel further down a path of permanent conflict, illiberal democracy and injustice. They work to prevent the creation of an independent Palestinian state and undermine the prospects for a viable two-state solution.⁴³

Liberal Zionists in the United States especially stress the importance of a strong relationship between the two nations remaining strong. This is similar to the conservative Zionist focus on Israel as an outpost of Western civilization, but while conservatives see Israel as a front in a battle against the Islamic hordes, liberal Zionists instead focus on Israel as a “beacon of democracy”⁴⁴ and of liberal ideals. One of the prime examples of this is a focus on Israel’s vibrant LGBT community. Israeli tourism groups focus on this, calling Tel Aviv “the ultimate LGBTQ travel destination.”⁴⁵ This line of thinking came to the mainstream during the 2016

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Philip Weiss, “Progressives reject Klobuchar’s salute to Israel as ‘beacon of democracy,’” *Mondoweiss*, October 16, 2019 <https://mondoweiss.net/2019/10/progressives-reject-klobuchars-salute-to-israel-as-beacon-of-democracy/>

⁴⁵ “Why Tel Aviv is the Ultimate LGBTQ Travel Destination,” *Tourist Israel*, Accessed May 1, 2021, <https://www.touristisrael.com/why-tel-aviv-is-the-ultimate-lgbtq-travel-destination/26062/>

American presidential election. When the Democratic Party platform committee was working on ironing out issues ahead of the 2016 Democratic National Convention, a fierce debate erupted over how the party should approach the Israel-Palestine issue. Bonnie Schaefer, a gay Jewish woman on the platform committee – in a response to a number of delegates (all supporters of Sen. Bernie Sanders, an American Jew with his own complicated relationship to Zionism) – stressed that Israel was “the only place in the Middle East where I can walk down the street with my wife hand-in-hand and not be afraid.”⁴⁶ While conservative Zionists want a strong Israel-US relationship to give the empire a foothold in a strategic location, liberal Zionists instead stress these social issues, giving them cover on the thornier issues they would rather avoid.

IV. How Lockean Colonialism Connects to Liberal Zionism

With Lockean colonialism and liberal Zionism both now satisfactorily defined and their origins well-established, this paper can now get to the heart of the argument at hand: explaining how Locke’s justification of colonialism in the Americas is echoed in liberal Zionism, from the time before the State of Israel was established up till today. Though there are several modern arguments and issues that will be discussed, the best place to start is with one of the oldest arguments in liberal Zionism: that in Palestine the Jewish people found “a land without people for a people without land.”

Though this phrase has come to be thought of as a very Jewish phrase, it has its origins in Christian writers who – much like modern Christian Zionists – wanted to bring about the return

⁴⁶ Molly O’Toole, “Inside the Democratic Party’s Showdown Over Israel-Palestine,” *Foreign Policy*, June 29, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/29/inside-the-democratic-partys-showdown-over-israel-palestine/>

of Jewish people to Israel they believe is prophesized in the Bible.⁴⁷ The first time it was used in a Jewish Zionist context, though, was in 1901 by Israel Zangwill, who wrote in the *New Liberal Review* that “Palestine is a country without a people; the Jews are a people without a county. The regeneration of the soil would bring the regeneration of the people.”⁴⁸

The historical record on Theodor Herzl, commonly thought of as the “father of Zionism,” is mixed when it comes to his beliefs regarding the indigenous people of Palestine. Though there are no recorded uses of him actually using the “land without people” quote, he is known to have been genuinely surprised to find out that Palestine had significant existing people believing it was a mostly empty land, ripe for the arrival of Jewish homesteaders.⁴⁹ There are historical accounts of Herzl, when told that there were in fact existing Arab societies in Palestine, responding “I did not know that, we are committing an injustice.”⁵⁰ On the other hand, one Herzl biographer writes that “[Herzl’s] attitude toward the indigenous population was one of benign indifference at best. He never questioned the popular view of colonialism as a mission of mercy that brought the blessings of civilization to stone-age savages” and that Herzl firmly believed that Arabs in Palestine would welcome the establishment of a Jewish state in the region as it would bring them “material and technological progress.”⁵¹ Herzl also said that a Jewish state, which would find most of its populations made up of Jews who left Europe, would serve as “a

⁴⁷ Diana Muir, “A Land Without People for a People Without a Land,” *Middle East Quarterly* (2008)

⁴⁸ Adam M. Garfinkle, “On the Origin, Meaning, Use and Abuse of a Phrase,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 27 no. 4 (1991), 540, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4283461>

⁴⁹ Garfinkle, “On the Origin, Meaning, Use and Abuse of a Phrase,” 539

⁵⁰ Garfinkle, “On the Origin, Meaning, Use and Abuse of a Phrase” 547

⁵¹ Allan C. Brownfeld, “Zionism at 100: The Myth of Palestine as ‘A Land Without People,’” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 16 (1988), 29

portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism.”⁵²

Though these two positions – that Palestine was at once an empty land the Jewish people could make their own and that while there were Arab people already there, establishing a Jewish state in Palestine would help both European civilization and the native population – are on the surface in opposition with one another, they can both be tied to Lockean colonialism.

One of the defining features of Locke’s colonial defense is the idea that there was “room enough” in the New World for colonial powers to expand their empires there. Klausen writes that “in the Second Treatise, America represents that place where such room in fact remains—where, because of natives’ seemingly inefficient land use, unoccupied wastes abound where foreign settlers may come and found new political regimes.”⁵³ A parallel to this can be found Zangwill and Herzl’s arguments. These early Zionists promoted the idea that it was an empty space where Jews could set up their own country and their own government, in essence founding a new social contract free from their disastrous past as residents of European countries. The idea of a vast, empty space where a brand-new political covenant, one based explicitly on the humanity of Jews, was understandably an easy sell.

The issue for liberal Zionists is that Palestine was not, in fact, an empty land in any sense. In the introduction to his volume *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Ilan Pappé makes explicit the connection between Zionism and classical colonialism: “The fact that the expellers were

⁵² David Lloyd, “Settler Colonialism and the State of Exception: The Example of Palestine/Israel,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 2 No. 1, 62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2012.10648826>

⁵³ Klausen, “Room Enough: America, Natural Liberty, and Consent in Locke’s Second Treatise,” 761

newcomers to the country, and part of a colonialist project, relates the case of Palestine to the colonialist history of ethnic cleansing in North and South America, Africa and Australia, where white settlers routinely committed such crimes.”⁵⁴ Pappé — who, it should be noted, is a Jewish Israeli historian writing about crimes committed by his own people — has a central thesis claiming that the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes in 1948 was centrally planned and not merely the result of the chaos of war. He uses this thesis to connect Zionism and the Jewish reclamation of the Holy Land colonial projects elsewhere in the world on the basis that unlike some other actions considered genocide or ethnic cleansing, such as the massacres in Bosnia or Rwanda in the 1990s, the Jewish forces carrying out the expulsions in Palestine were coming into the land as settlers, much like colonialists in Africa and the Americas in the 18th and 19th centuries.

This also relates to the Lockean idea of enclosure as a key part of claiming ownership over a land:

The same measures governed the possession of land too: whatsoever he tilled and reaped, laid up and made use of, before it spoiled, that was his peculiar right; whatsoever he enclosed, and could feed, and make use of, the cattle and product was also his. But if either the grass of his enclosure rotted on the ground, or the fruit of his planting perished without gathering, and laying up, this part of the earth, notwithstanding his enclosure, was still to be looked on as waste, and might be the possession of any other.⁵⁵

Locke also writes that “The fruit, or venison, which nourishes the wild Indian, who knows no enclosure, and is still a tenant in common, must be his, and so his, i.e. a part of him, that another can no longer have any right to it, before it can do him any good for the support of his life.”⁵⁶ In Locke’s view it is the physical enclosure of a space that allows someone to claim it as property.

⁵⁴ Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 8

⁵⁵ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 24

⁵⁶ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 19

Hence, it wasn't theft when white European settlers came to the Americas and forcibly took land that Indigenous Americans had been living on for generations. The "wild Indian" had not enclosed the land on which he lived, so it was available to be claimed. This tracks back to the other part of Herzl's arguments, that the people who he did admit were living in Palestine were not a civilized people in the European sense, and thus would ultimately benefit from the establishment of a Jewish settler-colonial state. Locke makes a similar point when he asks "whether in the wild woods and uncultivated waste of America, left to nature, without any improvement, tillage or husbandry, a thousand acres yield the needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniencies of life, as ten acres of equally fertile land do in Devonshire, where they are well cultivated?"⁵⁷ Locke is arguing that improvements to land help the native population even as they are dispossessed, just as Herzl argued would happen in Palestine.

While Locke is, at least on the surface, talking about physical enclosure of individual tracts of land, a connection can be made here to the idea that the Israeli settlers of 1948 "enclosed" the land by putting up the metaphorical fence of state borders. Going back further, the argument can be made that the land was first "enclosed" by the British when they set up the Mandate for Palestine in 1948, and that the Israeli settlers were merely the inheritors to that political "enclosure." Either way, because the Arabs living in Palestine never formally enclosed the land into a state with borders themselves, it was not claimed by them and thus it was justified for Jewish settlers to move in. Alan Dershowitz, one of the most prominent liberal Zionists in the United States, wrote in his 2003 tract *The Case for Israel* that while "Palestine was certainly not a land empty of all people,"⁵⁸ there simply weren't enough people living on the land for it to be

⁵⁷ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 24

⁵⁸ Alan M. Dershowitz, *The Case for Israel* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley & Sons, 2003), 24

in anyway considered occupied. He also stresses the idea that Palestine was “not a political entity in any meaningful sense”⁵⁹ and as having “ever-shifting boundaries”⁶⁰

This also mirrors Locke’s understanding of what it means to possess a land, given his stress of the idea of enclosure.⁶¹ While Locke may have been directly referencing the enclosure of a piece of land by a person for private use, the same principle can be applied regarding states. Because the Arabs living in Palestine hadn’t formally enclosed the land into a state with borders, it was not claimed and thus it is justified for Jewish settlers to move in. Despite this clear use of Lockean settler-colonial apologia, Dershowitz is steadfast in denying that Israel is a settler-colonial state — though his Americanism shines through in comparing Israeli settlers to American pilgrims trying to escape persecution, who under his logic are apparently also not guilty of settler-colonialism.⁶²

The other major part of Locke’s theory of land ownership is labor; not only must one enclose the land, but also work it agriculturally to truly have a claim on it:

Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property. It being by him removed from the common state nature hath placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it, that excludes the common right of other men: for this labour being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good, left in common for others.⁶³

The way in which this has been applied to Israeli settlement of Palestine has changed through the years. In the days immediately after the founding and settlement of Israel, Zionists pointed to the great agricultural achievements of Israeli settlers as a justification for the creation of the state.

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 22

⁶² Dershowitz, *The Case for Israel*, 13

⁶³ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 19

Zionists ran with the idea that they took a barren desert landscape and made it into a booming, bustling country filled with people, along with flora, fauna and the ability to grow enough food to feed a growing population. Colloquially, this is often referred to as “making the desert bloom.” Alan George notes that when the primary justification for the founding of Israel — the notion that it was an empty land calling out for a people to settle it — failed because it was pointed out that there was already an established population of Arabs in the area, “the Zionists emphasized the technical superiority of their agriculture to that of the native farmers. The latter, it was argued, would benefit greatly from the adoption of modern farming methods learned from the Jewish immigrants.”⁶⁴ The argument, essentially, is that the land that became Israel was uncultivated and underused by any Arab who did happen to be there before the Jewish settlers moved in, and that the settlers, the founders of Israel did a positive thing by coming and creating a new society.

For David Ben-Gurion, proving that Israel would be able to irrigate and cultivate the harsh territory in Palestine was key to gaining the support of the UN and the international community for the establishment of a Jewish state in the area.⁶⁵ In 1954, Ben-Gurion wrote an essay in the *New York Times Magazine* explaining why he had stepped down as Prime Minister and moved to the Negev; in part, he wrote that “there is room for only one Prime Minister, but for those who make the desert bloom there is room for hundreds, thousands and even millions.”⁶⁶ Golda Meir also emphasized the importance of Israel’s early achievements in agriculture, once

⁶⁴ Alan George, “‘Making the Desert Bloom’ A Myth Examined,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8, No. 2 (1979), 88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2536511>

⁶⁵ Allysia Finley, “How to Make a Desert Bloom,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 6, 2015 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-to-make-a-desert-bloom-1444169349>

⁶⁶ David Ben-Gurion, “Why I Retired to the Desert,” *The New York Times Magazine*, March 28, 1954, 47

saying that “we do not rejoice in victories. We rejoice when a new kind of cotton is grown and when strawberries bloom in Israel.”⁶⁷

The idea of “making the desert bloom” remains a key part of the Zionist national mythology. Even today, Israel’s production and distribution of fresh, clean water to its citizens is a point of pride, and their successes in that area are used by groups like the Jewish National Fund to cajole Jews in the diaspora to donate money; a March 2021 blog article published in the JNF website was bluntly titled “Giving to Israel and making the desert bloom,” and implored diaspora Jews to donate in order to expand Israel’s ability to desalinate and clean water for use by its citizens.⁶⁸ George acknowledges, for example, that the agriculture done by the early Israeli settlers was indeed a feat:

Prior to Israel's establishment in 1948, modern techniques of intensive cultivation, together with land reclamation and conservation projects, had already resulted in very high yields in Zionist agriculture and the extension of cultivation into formerly semi-arid areas and regions of swamp and sand dune. Developments since 1948 have been equally impressive.⁶⁹

The issue at hand, though, is not whether Israeli settlers were able to perform impressively in the field of agriculture. The issue is how this action is used as justification for the taking of land by Jewish settlers from the native Arab population. Though Dershowitz doesn’t explicitly repeat the tale of the rose blooming in the desert, he does take care to mention that “much of the land allocated to the Jewish state was originally swamp and desert land that had been irrigated and

⁶⁷ Judd Yadid “Israel’s Iron Lady Unfiltered: 17 Golda Meir Quotes on Her 117th Birthday,” *Haaretz*, May 3, 2015, <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-17-golda-meir-quotes-on-her-117th-birthday-1.5356683>

⁶⁸ Stacy Simon Lewin, “Giving to Israel and making the desert bloom,” *Jewish National Fund Impact Blog*, March 22, 2021 <https://www.jnf.org/blog/environment/giving-to-israel-and-making-the-desert-bloom>

⁶⁹ George, “‘Making the Desert Bloom’ A Myth Examined,” 98

made fertile by Jewish labor and investment.”⁷⁰ Though Dershowitz may not be particularly direct in his use of Lockean rhetoric to justify the establishment of Israel, he is clearly using the notion of expanding into unsettled land and improving it through agriculture and labor as a reason why the seizing of land in Palestine by Jewish settlers and the establishment of the state of Israel was acceptable, even if he also denies that Israel is in fact a settler-colonialist state.

Though agriculture is still important in the modern era, many liberal Zionists have also found another way to justify Israel as a settler-colonial state; the booming Israeli tech industry: Waze. Fiverr. Lemonade. Wix.⁷¹ All of these startups began in Israel. Some have even referred to Israel as the “startup nation”⁷² Additionally, many multinational tech firms have employees in Israel, including IBM (around 2,000 employees),⁷³ Applied Materials (around 1,600 employees)⁷⁴ and Intel (around 12,800 employees).⁷⁵ The areas in Israel where most of the tech boom has occurred has been nicknamed the “Silicon Wadi,” a play on America’s Silicon Valley.

This tech success has become a key selling point for Israel, coming both from within the country and from Zionists in the Jewish diaspora. The tech industry has become a tentpole of Israel’s hasbara⁷⁶ campaign. Hasbara Fellowships, an organization that seeks to “empower

⁷⁰ Dershowitz, *The Case for Israel*, 68

⁷¹ “Startup Nation Tech Fair,” Hasbara Fellowships, Accessed May 1, 2021, <https://hasbarafellowships.org/materials/start-up-tech-fair>

⁷² Sam Snead, “The 25 coolest tech companies in Israel,” *Insider*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/coolest-tech-startups-in-israel-2017-5>

⁷³ Meir Orbach, “IBM fires dozens of employees in Israel office,” *CTech*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.calcalistech.com/ctech/articles/0,7340,L-3875957,00.html>

⁷⁴ “Applied Materials Israel,” Applied Materials, Accessed May 1, 2021, <https://www.appliedmaterials.com/en-il/company/about/israel-overview>

⁷⁵ “About Intel Israel,” Intel, Accessed May 1, 2021, <https://www.intel.com/content/www/us/en/corporate-responsibility/intel-in-israel.html>

⁷⁶ Hasbara is a Hebrew word (literally meaning “explanation”) used by the Israeli government to describe its ongoing public relations put the best face forward for Israel in the rest of the world and to fight back against what it views as inaccurate information being peddled about the country.

advocates for Israel” has a package available for those advocates in other countries who would like to use Israel’s tech industry to sell Israel to people – especially young people – who might otherwise be apathetic about the country. These materials don’t just play up the amount of money that has been made through the Israeli tech industry, it also pushes the notion that Israeli technology has “made the world a better place” thorough breakthroughs in fields like medicine, security and even auto safety.

While this isn’t as clear-cut of a connection to Locke’s writing on labor as there is when it comes to agriculture, there are still parallels between the Second Treatise and the way modern Zionists use Israel’s tech achievements to justify the existence of the state. When commentators wax poetic about Israel’s achievements now, it isn’t about blooming a rose in the desert; it’s about how the hard work of Israeli entrepreneurs have created a better world not just for people living in Israel but all over. Israeli tech journalist Jonah Balfour writes that “Today, the Zionism of the past isn’t enough. Israel needs a new, modern take on Zionism that is just as innovative and new as the beating heart of its thriving startup ecosystem.”⁷⁷ Liberal Zionist writers also use Israel’s tech industry as a case for why the U.S.-Israeli relationship is so important:

Israel is today a technological superpower of the first order, one with a particularly strong aptitude in defense innovation. America has a deep interest in making sure it can exploit fully those extraordinary capabilities—and that China can’t. One way to go about that task is for diplomats to ring the alarm bells about Beijing’s growing role in critical sectors of Israel’s own economy, and about the risks this poses to the U.S.-Israel strategic relationship.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Jonah Balfour, “An Innovative New Zionism For the StartUp Nation,” *The Times of Israel*, May 18, 2016, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/an-innovative-new-zionism-for-the-startup-nation/>

⁷⁸ John Hannah and Annie Fixler, “Israel is a Tech Superpower, and America Needs it On Its Side,” *Mosaic*, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/israel-zionism/2019/12/israel-is-a-tech-superpower-and-america-needs-it-on-its-side/>

Underneath the focus on Israeli tech is the notion that if it weren't for the establishment of Israel, these technological innovations decades later would not have been possible. It was the settlement of Israel and the *labor* put into the industry by the settlers and their progeny that created this shiny new world of apps and advances. This is a parallel to the Lockean logic (still used by apologists for European colonization of the new world and other parts of the global south) that much of the modern world would not have come to be if it weren't for colonization. In short, the ends justify the means.

The final major connection to be made between liberal Zionism and Lockean colonialism comes in the form of another phrase that has become an important plank in the argument for Israel: the idea that, whatever else you might think about the Israeli government and the decisions it makes, Israel ultimately has “the right to exist.” In modern parlance, this phrase has become associated strongly with Israel and the Israeli-Arab conflict, but it dates to an essay by 19th century French historian Ernest Renan:

Man is a slave neither of his race nor his language, nor of his religion, nor of the course of rivers nor of the direction taken by mountain chains. A large aggregate of men, healthy in mind and warm of heart, creates the kind of moral conscience which we call a nation. So long as this moral consciousness gives proof of its strength by the sacrifices which demand the abdication of the individual to the advantage of the community, it is legitimate and has the right to exist.⁷⁹

In recent years, the “right to exist” of Israel has become, in many ways, the heart of all liberal Zionist arguments. In a 2003 speech, Dershowitz said that he wrote his book because he feared

⁷⁹ Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation,” March 3, 2017, <https://fee.org/articles/what-is-a-nation/>

that criticism of Israel in universities and in political discourse would “create a generation of students who believe that Israel has no right to exist.”⁸⁰

Again, this may not seem to be a direct parallel to Locke’s colonial theories, but if the layers of onion are peeled back, it is there. As discussed above, Locke establishes that property is established through enclosure and labor; liberal Zionists, seeking to avoid making the more brutish argument that Israeli Jews have a right to their state simply because they won out in a classic war of conquest, use these same notions of enclosure and labor to justify their support for the foundation and ongoing maintenance of Israel as state. Thus, when a liberal Zionist makes a grand statement about Israel’s right to exist, a plausible reading of their argument is that because the Israeli settlers and their descendants have done the job of enclosing and toiling on the land that makes up the State of Israel, it has the same right to exist that Locke would ascribe to a European colony in the Americas. While liberal and conservative Zionists may end up in the same place -- defending the existence of Israel against detractors and even the complaints of the indigenous population of Arab Palestinians – they get there via different paths. For conservatives, Israel has a “right to exist” based on their ability to win a war and then defend the gains of that war (and add additional gains in subsequent wars.) For liberals, the “right to exist” of Israel is based on fulfilling the Lockean requirements for claiming a piece of land as property.

V. Liberal Zionism’s Future and the Durability of Locke’s Colonial Justification

Though liberal Zionism has been one of the most dominant strains of the ideology in the American Jewish community for several decades, one could be forgiven for thinking it was dying on the vine. For the past half-decade, much of the public discourse around the subject of

⁸⁰ “Alan Dershowitz Speaks in His ‘The Case for Israel,’” UCLA, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://www.international.ucla.edu/cnes/article/5071>

Zionism amongst American Jews has been that liberal Zionism is an ideology with an expiration date that is fast approaching. Peter Beinart, the journalist and writer who was the standard bearer for liberal Zionist thought for several decades, has converted to a type of post-Zionist thought – spelling it out in a 2020 New York Times opinion column titled “I No Longer Believe in a Jewish State.” He writes:

I believed in Israel as a Jewish state because I grew up in a family that had hopped from continent to continent as diaspora Jewish communities crumbled. I saw Israel’s impact on my grandfather and father, who were never as happy or secure as when enveloped in a society of Jews. And I knew that Israel was a source of comfort and pride to millions of other Jews, some of whose families had experienced traumas greater than my own.⁸¹

He goes on to explain that why he still believes in a Jewish home, he no longer believes it has to be an explicitly Jewish state; rather, the continued violence in Palestine has caused him to embrace an alternative future where there is one state in Greater Palestine that can be home to Jews, Arabs and others. Beinart is among the most prominent examples of liberal Zionists turning away from the ideology, but he’s hardly the only. Even non-political figures like Israel-American actress Natalie Portman have been dragged into the fight after she cancelled her plans to accept an award in Jerusalem, writing on social media that she “chose not to attend because I did not want to appear as endorsing Benjamin Netanyahu, who was to be giving a speech at the ceremony.”⁸² Though she was careful to say that she was not part of the Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions Movement and surely didn’t say herself that she had abandoned her Zionism, that didn’t stop a flurry of articles in both the Jewish and mainstream presses about what Portman’s

⁸¹ Peter Beinart, “I No Longer Believe in a Jewish State,” *The New York Times*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/opinion/israel-annexation-two-state-solution.html>

⁸² Natalie Portman (@natalieportman), “My decision not to attend the Genesis Prize ceremony has been mischaracterized by others...,” Instagram photo, April 20, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BhzyyPWhnVf/?hl=en>

decision meant for liberal Zionism.⁸³ Given the totality of the past decade, and Israel's noticeable shift rightward both in word and action, the idea that liberal Zionism – both in Israel and in the diaspora – is dying is an understandable and even comforting conclusion for some.

The Lockean nature of liberal Zionism discussed in this paper's preceding sections, though, should be a caution to those who want to start piling the dirt on the corpse of the ideology. As noted in the introduction to this paper, Israeli settlement of Palestine and European Christian settlement of the Americas are at a minimum cousins. For this reason, it makes sense to ponder how modern American liberals consider the founding of America and all the attached horror.

In 2010, President Barack Obama signed a resolution offering an apology “on behalf of the people of the United States to all Native peoples for the many instances of violence, maltreatment, and neglect inflicted on Native peoples by citizens of the United States.”⁸⁴ Across the country, liberal institutions and activists have decided to stop celebrating Columbus day and begin celebrating Indigenous People's Day as a way of recognizing the atrocities committed by Columbus and other European colonizers against the native people of what became the United States and the rest of the Americas.⁸⁵ Clearly, liberals in the United States have come to reckon with the ugly history that defines the nation they live in. (Much as is the case with the founding of Israel, conservatives in the United States take a different approach, openly celebrating the

⁸³ Eric Levitz, “Natalie Portman and the Crisis of Liberal Zionism,” *New York Intelligencer*, April 26, 2018, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/04/natalie-portman-and-the-crisis-of-liberal-zionism.html>

⁸⁴ Rob Capriccioso, “A sorry saga: Obama signs Native American apology resolution; fails to draw attention to it,” *Indian Country Today*, January 13, 2010, <https://indianlaw.org/node/529>

⁸⁵ Leila Fadel, “Columbus Day Or Indigenous Peoples' Day?,” *NPR*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/14/769083847/columbus-day-or-indigenous-peoples-day>

conquest of the Americas as a simple part of history where one group of people overpowered another, fairly and squarely.⁸⁶⁾

Still, there have been no serious calls for a radical change with respect to what those actions bore. No mainstream liberal politician has called for a transfer of land sovereignty to the nations that were in the United States before colonization and westward expansion. Rather, the act of acknowledging wrongdoing is the penance. The idea of actually repairing the damage is unthinkable, because it would shake to the core the Lockean base of our society – Europeans claimed this land, and even if our modern sensibilities cause us to reflect on some of the uglier aspects of that, the act itself is irreversible.

The same could be the path liberal Zionists go down. Rather than ignoring the naqba, liberal Zionists new rhetorical move may well be to acknowledge and even apologize for it, all the while defending the modern existence of the Israeli state. The American example shows that Lockean colonialism is nothing if not sturdy and adaptable; there is no reason to think this wouldn't also apply to liberal Zionists.

⁸⁶ John Hirschauer, "A Defense of Christopher Columbus on Columbus Day," *National Review*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/10/columbus-day-a-defense-of-christopher-columbus/>

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