



Kate Meagher

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Thandika Mkandawire and the Decolonization of Settler Colonial Thinking

Professor Kate Meagher highlights how Thandika Mkandawire's work challenges the idea that settler colonialism produced "good institutions," revealing instead how it entrenched racial hierarchies, dispossession, and enduring structural injustices that continue to shape contemporary development and global politics.

Thandika Mkandawire, the late Chair of African Development at the LSE and celebrated Professor in ID, had a knack for taking trending development perspectives and turning them on their head to reveal how they are experienced by people of the Global South. Reading his work on settler **colonialism and institutions** is something of an 'aha moment', triggering a Gestalt shift that reveals what development looks like to those at the receiving end. Thandika's insights challenge the reigning perspective of Nobel-prize winning scholars, Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James Robinson (affectionately known as AJR in ID circles), who are credited with rehabilitating settler colonialism by distinguishing it from the violent and extractive practices of colonialism in areas less hospitable to European settlement. In their **seminal article** on the subject, AJR argued that settler colonialism, in contrast to its nasty extractive variant, implanted 'good institutions' associated with secure property rights, the rule of law, and democratic governance, which have driven successful development over the centuries.

Revisiting the experience of settler colonialism in Africa, Thandika's work raises questions about who settler colonial institutions were good for, and whether the settler era is as shrouded in the past as often suggested. Reflecting on settler colonialism through the prism of Thandika's life and work provides an ideal opportunity to highlight his **iconic research on African Development** to a new cohort of ID students, and, in the spirit of Black History month, shows how engagement with the histories of the colonized can contribute to deepening and decolonizing contemporary development debates.

Settler Colonialism: Whose Rights Count?

Both in his research and **in his life experience**, Thandika exposed a very different side of settler colonialism from that associated with AJR. Born in Southern Africa in 1940, Thandika spent the first two decades of his life under British colonial rule, experiencing what it was like to be on the wrong side the 'good institutions' of British settler colonies. As a child, he experienced forced removals in colonial Rhodesia, remembering being uprooted and transported in the rain, shivering with cold. As a teenager, Thandika was involved in protests against British imperialism and faced the brutal reprisals that followed. Thandika's experience and research remind us that British settler colonialism, in South Africa, Rhodesia, Kenya and so many other colonies, was not so long ago, and that the institutions it spawned, which denied property rights, political rights and security to the majority of the population, were, from an African perspective, difficult to characterize as 'good institutions'.

Looking beyond AJR's sanitized history of transplanting institutions, like an exercise in English country gardening, Thandika examined how settler colonialism reshaped the nature of states, indigenous institutions and citizenship rights in ways that advantaged some, while dispossessing and repressing others. In his 2010 article '**On Taxation and Colonial Heritage**', Thandika details how settler colonial institutions gave rise to more bureaucratically capable states adept at taxation and social welfare provisioning, but also more extractive and oppressive of local populations. Settler colonial states embedded racial hierarchies that suppressed and criminalized local economic and social institutions that might disrupt the flow of labour to settler farms and mines, while subjecting local populations to heavy taxation, minimal services and draconian movement controls. Indeed, as **Leigh Gardner** noted, racially segregated colonial systems restricted the rights of Africans so severely that the expatriate Somali community in colonial Kenya lobbied to be recognized as Asians in order to improve their rights!

In other settler colonial contexts, the disturbing legacies of settler colonial institutions have been highlighted in recent films on the degradation and wanton killing of North American native populations in ***Killers of the Flower Moon***, or the infamous 1921 **Tulsa race massacre**, both of which were erased from history for decades, and used laws and institutions to punish rather than protect the property rights of successful non-white populations in the United States. The underlying message of these incidents, and of Thandika's work on settler colonialism in Africa, is not only about the injustices perpetrated in the past, but about the ways in which settler colonialism embeds injustice within the institutions of society in ways that feel modern and efficient to the descendants of settlers, while subjecting indigenous and racialized populations to embedded and enduring structural violence.

Settler Colonialism in Contemporary Times

In addition to raising questions about whose interests are served by the institutions of settler colonialism, Thandika's work emphasizes the ongoing injustices perpetrated by settler colonial regimes. Some argue that we can't judge the past by the norms of the present, but it's worth remembering that South Africa maintained settler colonial institutions into the early 1990s. Indeed, the recent war on Gaza has brought the realities of settler colonialism into the present day. Settler colonialism is not about legacies of 500 years ago, or even 100 years ago, but is playing out in the televised and techno-military glare of the 21st Century.

In the context of Israel/Palestine, it is clear that there is more at stake than political inequality. In his recent book, *Neither Settler nor Native*, Mahmoud Mamdani, long-time friend and colleague of Thandika, noted that the nature of settler colonialism varies depending on whether settlers want the labour or just the land of indigenous populations. Unlike in Southern Africa where the settlers needed African labour, in Palestine Mamdani highlights a more violent form of settler colonialism in which the settlers only want the land. Far from being inclusive, settler institutions focus on making Palestinian lives unlivable through legal apartheid, discriminatory taxes, derisory services, and intensifying constraints on mobility, hemming Palestinians into a 'state of exception', without citizenship rights, property rights, or even a right to life, as repeatedly documented by [Human Rights organizations](#), the [UN](#), and [Israeli as well as other historians](#).

But, as Hanieh, Knox and Ziadah show in their illuminating [new book](#), settler colonialism is not just about the harm done on the ground by settlers, but also about the overseas metropolises supporting the settler project, enriching themselves from the resources and geopolitical advantage afforded by their settler strongmen. While Thandika showed how settler colonialism is experienced by local populations, the local institutional carnage and ongoing institutional violence and inequality it produces, the contemporary reality of settler colonialism also reveals how it corrodes the liberal international order, ravaging international law, criminalizing public protest, and eroding moral boundaries not only on the ground, but in the [USA, the UK and many other European countries](#).

Confronted by the expanding institutional devastation of settler colonialism, past and present, the argument of AJR that it produces 'good institutions' is increasingly untenable, and reminds us ever more starkly of the need for a more decolonized institutional understanding of contemporary development.

The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the International Development LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Featured image: New houses being constructed at the Israeli settlement of Eldad, south of Bethlehem in the West Bank. [Flickr](#).

About the author



Kate Meagher, is a Professor in Development Studies at LSE. Her research focuses on the changing character of the informal economy in contemporary Africa, and the implications of economic informalization for development, democratization and globalization.

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