THE MAJORITY OF CANADIANS DON'T KNOW THE MEANING OF DECOLONIZATION AND SETTLER COLONIALISM: DOES IT MATTER?

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Settler colonialism is described as a distinct type of colonialism that operates through the replacement of Indigenous populations with an invasive settler society. This implies that there are two types of people living in Canada: the rooted indigenous population that first arrived on the land(s) and the others — the non-Indigenous population.

The term settler colonialism has been employed for several decades and has taken on greater importance in global conversations about indigeneity. Its use has been especially widespread amongst academics in the social sciences and humanities disciplines and it is very much at the centre of the field of colonial studies.

Debates around settler colonial studies have not been without controversy Critics have pointed to the tendency among some scholars to assume settlement is inevitable and in doing so absolve settler societies and states of the responsibility of reconciling with Indigenous peoples. Those thinking that settlement is inevitable tend to place the burden for reconciliation on Indigenous peoples.

But perhaps the most contentious areas in the conceptualization and discourse around settler colonialism are the debates about identities to which the term gives rise. Particularly controversial is the view that oppressed or marginalized communities are complicit in settler colonialism and thus are among those responsible for the historic injustices committed towards Indigenous peoples. Some have difficulty reconciling the view that a "forced

migrant" is a "complicit" settler. Should descendants of enslaved individuals be considered settlers in the settler-indigenous dichotomy? In a response to the question, respected Indigenous leader Bob Joseph contends descendants of slaves didn't have a choice to come here and hence "wouldn't be settlers in the strict sense" of that term. For her part, Chelsea Vowel, a leading expert on colonial studies, states that: "...originally I used a binary wherein settlers were all non-Indigenous peoples. However, that approach is reductive, and in some cases, actively harmful in my opinion. I specifically refer to settlers as '...the non-Indigenous peoples living in Canada who form the European-descended sociopolitical majority — aka white people.' "

Vowel adds that: "...other people can come here and 'settle' on these lands, and be folded into the settler-colonial project that is Canada, BUT settler colonials, by definition, occupy lands and impose their legal orders on everyone. Immigrants from Somalia, for example, do not do this. It's not a bright line definition."

She concludes that, "the descendants of enslaved Africans absolutely cannot be considered settlers. Enslaved peoples could not consent to being brought here, and their presence cannot confer upon their descendants acceptance into the settler colonial system."

The dichotomous identities framing that underlies the settler colonial concept is important towards understanding the process of reconciliation as it offers a lens via which to categorize the participants. The "us and them" identity framing of settler colonialism simplifies the otherwise wide range of settler identity-based historical narratives — that is, their migration stories and/or their trajectories. Doing so may help reaffirm the collective responsibility of non-Indigenous persons in pursuing efforts at reconciliation.

The exception or nuance provided to the settler-Indigenous dichotomy that is respectively offered by Joseph and Vowel in the case of persons who are descendants of enslaved people may partly explain the confusion on the part of many Canadians when asked about the meaning of settler colonialism. Evidence for the confusion is offered in a February 2022 public opinion survey conducted by the firm Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies, which reveals that some two in three Canadians do not regard the term settler colonists as appropriate when referring to non-Indigenous Canadians.

As observed in Table 1, however, there is an important generational difference in the degree to which the term settler colonist is deemed to be applicable to non-Indigenous individuals. The majority of respondents under the age of 25 are most likely to agree that the term is applicable while those over the age of 35 are far less likely to concur.

But while the Leger-ACS survey's youngest cohort believes the term settler colonist is applicable to non-Indigenous people, a clear majority of Canadians between the ages of 18 and 24 do not consider themselves settler colonists. The generational difference seen in Table 1 diminishes considerably when Canadians are asked whether they regard themselves as settler colonists.

When asked whether they regard themselves as settler colonists, some three-quarters of non-

TABLE 1. SETTLER COLONIALISM IS DEFINED AS A FORM OF COLONIALISM THAT SEEKS TO REPLACE THE ORIGINAL POPULATION (I.E., INDIGENOUS PEOPLES) OF THE COLONIZED TERRITORY (CANADA) WITH A NEW SOCIETY OF SETTLERS. SOME OBSERVERS USE THE TERM 'SETTLER COLONISTS' TO DESCRIBE CANADIANS WHO ARE NOT INDIGENOUS. DO YOU THINK THAT THIS TERM IS AN APPROPRIATE TERM TO DESCRIBE NON-INDIGENOUS CANADIANS?

	TOTAL	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 +
YES	34%	56%	42%	29%	28%	25%	31%
NO	66%	44%	58%	71%	72%	75%	69%

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, February 4-6, 2022

TABLE 2. DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE A SETTLER-COLONIST IN CANADA?

	TOTAL	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 +
YES	27%	39%	30%	26%	21%	26%	26%
NO	73%	61%	70%	74%	79%	74%	74%

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, February 4-6, 2022

immigrants and immigrants reject the label. Place of birth doesn't appear to be a consideration when it comes to the designation of settler colonists in Canada. There is also little discussion as to whether newcomers to Canada should be classed as settler colonists regardless of the migrant's trajectory/pathway.

TABLE 3. DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE A SETTLER-COLONIST IN CANADA?

	BORN IN CANADA	BORN OUTSIDE OF CANADA
YES	28%	24%
NO	72%	76%

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, February 4-6, 2022

DEFINING DECOLONIZATION

Underlying the seeming ambiguity in the public discourse when it comes to settler colonialism and settler identification is a widespread lack of knowledge about the meaning of decolonization. Decolonization can be defined simply as ending colonization, but this raises a question about the meaning of "colonial." According to one source: "Colonization involves one group taking control of the lands, resources, languages, cultures, and relationships of another group."

But the majority of Canadians admit to not knowing what is meant by the term decolonization, as the Leger-ACS survey has 60 per cent saying they don't know what the term is supposed to imply. Once again there is a generational difference with at least one in two respondents under 35 saying they know what is meant by decolonization compared with about one in three over the age of 35 who say they don't know.

Not surprisingly, those survey respondents saying they don't know the meaning of decolonization also disagree with the view that settler colonist is

TABLE 4. SOME OBSERVERS BELIEVE THAT DECOLONIZING CANADA IS THE ONLY SOLUTION TO CORRECTING THE HISTORIC INJUSTICES COMMITTED AGAINST CANADA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES. DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT IS MEANT BY DECOLONIZATION?

	TOTAL	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 +
YES	40%	56%	50%	38%	37%	33%	33%
NO	60%	44%	50%	62%	63%	67%	67%

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, February 4-6, 2022

an appropriate term to describe non-Indigenous Canadians. More surprising is that the majority of survey respondents who purport to understand the meaning of decolonization do not agree that settler colonists is an appropriate term to define non-Indigenous Canadians.

Several definitions of decolonization establish the connection with indigenization and as one source observes, if "...decolonization is the removal or undoing of colonial elements, then Indigenization could be seen as the addition or redoing of Indigenous elements."

How do those Canadians saying they understand the meaning of decolonization actually define the term? The February 2022 Leger-ACS survey asked respondents to explain their understanding of decolonization. As observed below, the responses vary with some simply saying it is undoing colonialism and yet others properly acknowledging the connection decolonization has with Indigenization and reconciliation.

TABLE 5.

		SOME OBSERVERS BELIEVE THAT DECOLONIZING CANADA IS THE ONLY SOLUTION TO CORRECTING THE HISTORIC INJUSTICES COMMITTED AGAINST CANADA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES. DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT IS MEANT BY DECOLONIZATION?	
		YES	NO
SOME OBSERVERS BELIEVE THAT DECOLONIZING CANADA IS THE ONLY SOLUTION TO CORRECTING THE HISTORIC INJUSTICES COMMITTED AGAINST CANADA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES. DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT IS MEANT BY DECOLONIZATION?	**YES**	45.2%	25.8%
	NO	54.8%	74.2%
TOTAL		100.0%	100.0%

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, February 4-6, 2022

CONCLUSION

Writing in the *Washington Post*, Ottawa-based columnist and political scientist David Moscrop says that "as always, many say they want indigenous reconciliation but expect to sacrifice little or nothing at all to get there. Many Canadians can't even abide being called what they are: settlers." Indeed, the survey findings cited above reveal that the majority of Canadians reject the label. Some may see the refusal to accept such a designation as an important obstacle to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

TABLE 6.

CUTTING TIES WITH THE MONARCHY/QUEEN/GREAT BRITAIN	8.8%	Reconciliation / acknowledgement of all the injustices / reparations	3.4%
REMOVAL OF COLONIAL/OCCIDENTAL POWER/CONTROL/ POLICIES/SYMBOLS	7.3%	Getting rid of the colonial history / looking at history differently	3.3%
UNDOING OF COLONIALISM / GETTING RID OF COLONIZATION	6.4%	Leave / relocate / moving out of the country/Canada	3.1%
LEAVING IT INDEPENDENT / WITHDRAWING FROM A COLONY / FREEING THE LAND	5.9%	Giving everyone equal opportunities/rights / equality	2.4%
ALLOWING INDIGENOUS TO RECLAIM THEIR LAND / TURNING THE LAND BACK TO NATIVE	5.7%	Separate people from other/ separation	2.4%
BECOMING INDEPENDENT / INDEPENDENT COUNTRY / NATION	5.4%	Undoing assimilation laws / respecting indigenous culture/ way of life	1.8%
LETTING INDIGENOUS GOVERN THEMSELVES / NATIVE SELF-GOVERNMENT/DETERMINATION	4.1%	Accepting the past/colonial history	1.6%
SELF-GOVERNMENT / AUTONOMOUS LEGISLATION POWERS / GIVING POWER TO PEOPLE	3.6%	A nation domination of a territory / being a colony / enlargement of colonial lands	1.6%
INCREASING INDIGENOUS RIGHTS/POWER	3.6%	Stopping white supremacy / making it less white / punishing white people	1.3%
COLONIES BECOMING INDEPENDENT	3.4%	Giving everyone equal opportunities/rights / equality	2.4%
RECONCILIATION / ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF ALL THE INJUSTICES / REPARATIONS	3.4%	Separate people from other/ separation	2.4%
GETTING RID OF THE COLONIAL HISTORY / LOOKING AT HISTORY DIFFERENTLY	3.3%	Undoing assimilation laws / respecting indigenous culture/ way of life	1.8%
LEAVE / RELOCATE / MOVING OUT OF THE COUNTRY/CANADA	3.1%	Accepting the past/colonial history	1.6%

Source: Leger for the Association for Canadian Studies, February 4-6, 2022

Echoing some of Chelsea Vowel's work, Moscrop adds that "...the project of reconciliation in Canada cannot proceed without an accounting of the past and present of colonialism. Naming is an important part of understanding. Without understanding, there can be no reconciliation... . One must therefore support naming, including calling "the non-Indigenous peoples living in Canada who form the European-descended sociopolitical majority" what they are.

But the latter statement implies a more nuanced and less reductionist view of who constitutes a settler colonist and potentially exempts certain non-Europeans from the categorization. But as observed above, the larger challenge for "naming" is

reflected in surveys of Canadians that make it clear the majority of the population doesn't understand the meaning of either the terms settler colonist or decolonization. And even those who purport to understand the terms do not appear to be as in the know as they may assume. For some, comprehension of the discourse may not be all too relevant as long as key actors understand what it means. The risk of taking such a view is that the critical objective of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples is not a "whole of society" project.