CHAPTER FIVE

SETTLER COLONIALISM IN AFRICA*

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, European overseas settlement has been associated with those countries populated by Europeans (United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Chile, Argentina and Uruguay). These territories, described by Crosby as “Neo Europes”, welcomed more than 95% of the 60 to 65 million Europeans who emigrated overseas between the 15th century and the middle of the 20th century (Crosby 1986, Etemad 2000: 35). The attraction that these countries held for Europeans could be explained for the most part by their temperate climates¹ and by the small numbers of indigenous populations, who were poorly politically organized and therefore incapable of resisting the invasion and subsequent extermination perpetrated by the European settlers. Furthermore, because of their geographical isolation from the American continent and the Pacific territories, indigenous populations were decimated by diseases imported from the “Old World”, making their eviction easier. Examples nonetheless exist, albeit

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The current chapter is based on two earlier texts – the first, entitled “Colonial settler economies in Africa” was presented to the 14th International Congress on Economic History in Helsinki in August 2006. The second, entitled “Populations et économies des colonies d’implantation européenne en Afrique (Afrique du Sud, Algérie, Kenya et Rhodésie du Sud)” was published in the Annales de Démographie Historique (Lützelschwab, 2007) – both are largely reproduced here. I should like to take the opportunity to thank William Gervase Clarence-Smith, as well as two anonymous reviewers for their observations and suggestions about these two texts. I should also like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the participants in the Workshop on African Economic History organised by Gareth Austin at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva (May 2011), to editor Jacob Metzer, and to the Publisher’s referee for their valuable comments and observations on the most recent versions of this chapter.

¹ This climate facilitated both the transfer of plants and animals, as well as technologies. Furthermore, these “Neo Europes” are situated at median latitudes where the long summer days provide excellent conditions for photosynthesis (Weaver, 2003: 11).
on a smaller scale, of settlement by Europeans in Africa. This is the case for instance in North Africa, and in Southern and East Africa. The purpose of the current discussion is to seek to understand how European settlers came to establish themselves in four African territories – South Africa, Algeria, Kenya and Southern Rhodesia – in spite of the fact that these lands were not uninhabited and that their populations neither eclipsed themselves, nor disappeared in the face of European intrusion.

The debates surrounding these African territories are not new. In his categorization of colonialism, Jürgen Osterhammel (1997: 7 and 10–12) singles out a particular type of “overseas settlement colonization” that he labels “African” in light of its most significant modern examples (Algeria, Rhodesia, Kenya, and South Africa). Historians studying these territories agree that they share three principal characteristics: first, the settlers appropriated a more or less significant share of the land; next, the settlers were economically dependent on indigenous labor; and finally, the colonial state played a significant role in determining access to land and labor (Osterhammel 1997: 7, Elkins and Pedersen 2005: 8–12). This was true of all four territories.

Few comparative studies exist of these four territories. This chapter is therefore both part of a comparative exercise and a continuation of earlier work. It starts from the hypothesis that all colonization, in the real sense of the word, that is to say the creation of agricultural settlements, is dependent on the original ratio of “man/cultivable land”. This approach, which uses the term “colonization” in its most literal sense to mean “the attribution of land to non-native populations, in order for them to become established in the country” (Charnay 1991: 113),2 allows us to group together all these African examples as a distinct category with a single typology (as Jürgen Osterhammel does) while at the same time highlighting the subtle differences that exist within this type of colonization.

This begs an important question which must be addressed before we can get to the heart of the matter: is it accurate to talk of colonization, in the Latin sense of the term,3 when describing European settlement in these territories? From the point of view of the discourse, the answer is: absolutely. Not only did the concepts which underpinned the ideology used to justify the appropriation of land by the European powers start from the premise that these territories were (to a large extent at least)

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2 Translated from the original French.
3 The Latin word colonus means cultivator, farmer, inhabitant. See Pervillé (1993, 4).