The Globalization of Police Knowledge:
Settling Failure, Waging Success

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For a number of years now I have focused on how forms of knowledge related to policing, security and war travel geographically.

In doing so I have focused extensively on the representation of Palestine/Israel as a key "laboratory" or "node" of global violence. I have termed this critical body of work "the laboratory thesis".

The thesis suggests that the Occupied Palestinian Territories function as zones of 'real world' experimentation in which new weapons and surveillance techniques are tested.

Access to these so-called "laboratory spaces" allegedly allows Israeli security firms improve their products and services but also to brand them as "combat-proven".

The laboratory thesis has advanced our understanding of how Israel sustains its settler-colonial project. Yet I argue that it has overlooked sites of failure and difficulty encountered in producing and circulating Israel's policing and security knowhow globally. This, I want to suggest, has come at a significant cost.

Today, my core position is that thinking about failure and difficulty more centrally in relation to the global mobility policing knowledge is both necessary and fruitful.

I will situate my remarks in relation to Israel's violent repression of the Great March of Return protests in Gaza. I will show how the events have been read and then present an alternative interpretation. Following this, I will outline two twin concepts I'm currently developing, namely "settling failure" and "waging success".

The Great March of Return protests began on March 30, 2018. At the core of the protests is the demand for Palestinian refugees and their descendants to be allowed to return to the places they have been displaced from since the Nakba or catastrophe in 1948.

Since March, Israeli security forces have killed an estimated 190, including children, medics and journalists as well as maiming thousands more, relying extensively on snipers shooting at close range.

This crackdown has also revived discussions about the idea of Gaza as a "laboratory", as seen for instance in this report by the Israeli group Coalition of Women for Peace.

It covers a range of issues but advances two specific claims relevant to my remarks today:

First, it alleges new "innovations" in Israeli strategies of violence: As it notes, "The Great Return March revealed two newly developing ISF [Israeli Security Forces] strategies: the increased use of snipers in "eliminating threats" and of drones in controlling— and dispersing— crowds" (CWP 2018: 4).

A range of journalists and human rights groups have further alleged the use of "experimental" explosive forms of ammunition, thereby threatening to violate the longstanding international prohibitions of their use in warfare (Norton 2018).

Gaza's status as a "laboratory" has thereby been invoked to partially explain an apparent recent shift in the nature of Israeli violence.

Second, the Report references real-world 'testing' in order to 'explain' the mobility of certain technologies/practices of war and repression: It agues that "Because they proved 'successful' from the beginning… [the Israeli Ministry of Defense] purchased hundreds of additional drones the night after the first large-scale demonstrations in Gaza at the end of March" (2018: 5).

Indeed, while emphasizing that an apparent tactical shift in how Palestinians were being targeted, the Report suggests that the exploitation of the Great March as a source of knowledge and profit represents "Business as Usual".

Such reports provide crucial information that counter Israel's rationalizations of its violence as 'normal', proportional and just.

Yet in their efforts to expose and explain shifts in the nature of Israeli violence and the political economies that surround and structure it, they obscure and overlook much as well.

The first issue I will discuss today concerns their claims about shifts in Israeli violence. For instance, allegations of the use of "explosive" bullets have been challenged. As one weapons expert has convincingly argued, the nature of the wounds found on victims in Gaza can be readily explained by the close proximity of snipers to their targets (rather than due to the use of explosive bullets).

In addition, the wounds suffered during the Great March were only "unusual" in the sense that they resemble those from Israel's previous military operations in Gaza (Haas). The Israeli killing of civilians with snipers per se is thus categorically NOT new.

Even more importantly, however, the critical focus on exposing escalation and innovation results in a misplaced political focus. It implies that under 'normal' conditions Israeli settler-colonial violence is somehow more proportional, reasonable or acceptable.

In this sense it falls into the longstanding trap of critiquing of state violence in the terms of "militarization" or "privatization", which narrowly focuses on curtailing the perceived exceptional excesses of state violence rather than on confronting their "systemic" and routinized character.

Second, the laboratory thesis' conceptions of real-world 'testing' and 'proving success' are thin and tautological. For instance, the Coalition of Women for Peace Report essentially treats evidence that Israel's Ministry of Defence purchased drones following their 'use' as evidence that they 'worked' successfully!

Yet when we look at what actually happened during the Great March beyond a very superficial level, these conceptions of 'testing' and 'success' do not hold up.

In contrast to the idea of laboratory 'testing' as a process, which definitively proves the efficiency of subduing anti-colonial struggle, the 'results' of Israel's repression of the Great March proved anything but obvious or settled.

Rather, the visibility of these atrocities gave rise to contestations among a range of actors surrounding the basic 'facts on the ground' (who got killed, how and by whom), as well as what these deaths signified and who bore responsibility for them.

Within this struggle, moreover, Israeli officials' attempts to 'explain' their targeting of protesters as "advanced", "precise" and "deliberate" became key sites of contestation.

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For instance, a tweet on March 31 from official @IDFSpokesperson account asserted:

"Yesterday we saw 30,000 people; we arrived prepared and with precise reinforcements. Nothing was carried out uncontrolled; everything was accurate and measured, and we know where every bullet landed."

Yet this tweet was re-interpreted by the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem as an official Israeli acceptance of responsibility for committing a war crime.

Thus while attempting to 'explain' and rationalize the violence against Palestinians to an international audience as 'precise', 'controlled' and 'measured' this move backfired – increasing rather than reducing controversy.

Israeli officials also encountered further difficulty in representing their killings as "innovative" or even specifically "Israeli" to international onlookers.

The vast majority of sniper rifles used to repress the Great March were American-made.

This reliance on US-made weapons seems to have complicated Israel's efforts to use its Gaza massacre as a showcase for Israeli innovation in the crafts of violence – threatening (rather than facilitating) "business as usual".

As Israeli political economist Shir Hever noted that during "the previous attacks on Gaza […] the Israeli military has specifically showcased their use of Israeli weapons in these attacks because they want to sell them"

But as he continued: "This time we don't see that, because they're using American weapons" (in addition to a limited number of Israel-made weapons), suggesting that "the Israeli strategy of using the Gaza Strip as a laboratory is collapsing" (Hever 2018).

I have some reservations that this supposed "collapse" is as new or totalizing a development as Hever implies.

Nevertheless, he signals to something important: the simple fact of Israeli security forces meting out violence does not itself guarantee that a set of obvious or pre-determined "lessons" will be automatically circulated elsewhere.

One of my main critiques of the laboratory thesis is that it leaves little room for possible disruptions or difficulties in part because it portrays an understanding of real-world testing that is always and inherently successful.

I have therefore begun to look for theoretical sources for inspiration in how to re-imagine the idea of policing/security laboratories.

Here I have found literature from science and technology studies (STS) particularly helpful because it challenges the myth of science as rational, ordered and instrumental.

In doing so, STS scholars have usefully questioned the notion that 'facts' are simply reflections of material 'reality' or 'nature' by situating laboratories' central role in the active "fabrication" of knowledge:

As Michel Callon and his colleagues put it: "The laboratory is a machine for producing **inscriptions,** for making possible their discussion, interpretation, and mobilization […] The famous data (givens) of experience are never given; they are obtained, "made," fabricated. (Callon et al. 2001: 52).

STS further provides a framework through which to make sense of how certain forms of knowledge, practices and technologies become generalized without conceding that this outcome reflects their superiority.

Indeed, STS scholars like Bruno Latour closely grapple with issues of success and failure in understanding broader questions of institutional reproduction, drawing attention to how outcomes of policies and projects are negotiated and thereby **settled** as successes or failures.

This approach to the uncertain and negotiated interface between success and failure, I want to argue, is helpful in understanding how protracted settler violence can be represented as successful, inevitable and desirable by taking these "fabrications" seriously for what they are -- namely as highly inventive (and indeed often questionable) "lessons of empire" that are always at risk of stumbling and being undone.

STS' core focus on the fabrication of knowledge and the uncertain interface between success and failure also resonates with recent reconsiderations of about how to define settler colonialism itself.

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Ann Laura Stoler's has recently invited us to reconsider the prevailing idea of settler colonialism as a unique "type" or fixed set of relations of imperial domination:

As she argues: "Settler colonialism is no more fixed and given than are any colonial formations that assert their illegitimate claims. Settler colonialism might better be understood not as a unique "type," but as the effect of a failed or protracted contest over appropriation and dispossession that is not over when the victories are declared, killings are accomplished, and decimation is resolved as the only "solution." Settler colonialism is only ever an imperial process in formation whose security apparatus confirms that it is always at risk of being undone" (60-1).

Drawing on these insights from STS and Stoler, I now want to briefly outline two concepts I'm beginning to develop namely "settling failure" and "waging success", which address how categories failure and success are *policed.*

The notion of settling failure seeks to take more seriously that the recurring failures found in projects of settler-colonization are not incidental and indeed central to developing and circulating policing and security knowledge.

As Stoler suggests, questions about failure are never fully resolved because contemporary settler projects are **defined** by their recurring failures.

Yet in order for settler projects to appear as linear, instrumental and unhindered, these failures need to be constantly "re-settled" over and over through forms of rationalization in the form of international encounters.

As such, I want to suggest the process of "settling failure" represents a core of how settler colonial projects maintain their global legitimacy and claims to permanence and inevitability, in light of the constant practical challenges encountered in the actual practices of violent colonial dispossession.

This leads me to the second concept I'm developing, namely Waging Success:

In relation to the instruments of violence used to repress the Great March, I have questioned whether 'testing' them in practice really proved their merits one way or another.

What is clear, however, is that exercise of violence in 'real-world' scenarios certainly **can** produce the raw material for rationalizing these policy interventions and promoting their adoption elsewhere.

The notion of waging success, therefore, takes as its starting point that success is always a contingent and uncertain accomplishment rather than a reflection of some stable, material 'reality'.

Following this, waging success situates this process of rationalization as an ongoing public relations **war** in its own right, thereby challenging the idea that settler-colonial projects succeed (or fail) merely on the basis of the degrees or types of violence they employ.

The concepts of settling failure and waging success can also help to push the concept of pacification further.

Pacification is closely associated with violent colonial dispossession though insists on foregrounding pacification's "productive" nature, in the sense of pacification as fabrication of order rather simply the exercise of brute violence.

My work is developing this emphasis on "productivity" further. The notion of waging success specifically emphasizes that although the mobilization of policing/security knowledge is fundamentally wedded to the ongoing exercise of violence, knowledge does not arise 'naturally' or in lockstep with patterns of killing.

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Pacification also places a central emphasis on theorizing security projects and their roles in order-formation as essentially unfinished projects. Here I want to emphasize that the productivity of pacification projects in terms of knowledge mobilization go hand-in-hand with their inherently unfulfilled and ever-unfolding qualities.

If we take seriously that pacification projects are ever and always ongoing and never fulfilled, so too are the practices and emergent forms of knowhow that these projects rely on and generate.