

**Netta Cohen**, *New Under the Sun: Early Zionist Encounters with the Climate in Palestine*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2024. ISBN: 9780520397224 (cloth); ISBN: 9780520397231 (paper); ISBN: 9780520397255 (ebook)

Netta Cohen's *New Under the Sun* offers a comprehensive exploration of how Zionist settlers engaged with Palestine's climate during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Drawing from a wide-ranging interdisciplinary archive, including medicine, botany, architecture, and economic planning, Cohen presents a nuanced analysis of the environmental, colonial, religious, and ideological dimensions of Zionist environmental knowledge. Her work explores the interplay between Zionist efforts to adapt to Palestine's climate and the broader context of European colonial scientific practices. This book makes a significant contribution to environmental history, colonial studies, and the history of science by showcasing how ecological knowledge and environmental discourses were constructed in Palestine to copy the European model of development, while disregarding indigenous ways of living.

Cohen's central argument is that early Zionist perceptions of Palestine's climate were heavily influenced by colonial frameworks and Eurocentric views. The primarily Jewish settler population positioned themselves physically and ideologically between the East and the West. Though they aligned with the Western cultural tradition in the eyes of Palestinians, they were not considered as "white" or Western by Europeans either. Initially, Zionist discourse on Palestine's climate was infused with ideas of organic belonging and religious ideology, emphasizing the return to their "rightful" land. However, as settlers confronted the land's physical realities, these perceptions evolved into a more pragmatic, scientific approach. The idealistic vision of harmonious return gave way to a pragmatic strategy focused on survival, agricultural productivity, and nation-building.

The book's strength lies in its examination of how climate-related knowledge was produced and implemented within Zionist settler society. Cohen employs network theory to analyze Zionist climatology as "*simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society*" (Latour 1993:6, cited on p.1). She demonstrates how colonial knowledge of warm climates in regions like British India and French North Africa influenced Zionist experts in medicine, architecture, and agriculture, highlighting the embeddedness of Zionist practices within global colonial networks. The analysis is expanded further by

considering the more-than-human, exploring how plants, diseases, and climatic phenomena shaped Zionist practices, and illustrating the interconnectedness of human and ecological histories.

The evolution of Zionist climate science reflects both environmental nostalgia and settler-colonial dynamics. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century explorations of settlement sites like El Arish and East Africa, driven by the Zionist Organization's desire for credibility, were more symbolic than practical. After World War I, climate research in Palestine became central to Zionist settlement ambitions, bolstered by British collaboration and new military technologies. Initially rooted in the belief that races were suited to specific climates, the focus shifted to a "universalized" concept of acclimatization, which positioned Jews as better adapted to heat not through race, but through cultural factors (p.47-54). This shift marginalized the indigenous Palestinian population, particularly Bedouins, who had before been perceived as more suited to the heat. It went hand-in-hand with the ideological shift from Bedouins romanticized as biblical forefathers to the destructors of the promised land, both evolving and reinforcing settler-colonial ideologies (Klein 2024).

Infrastructural adaptations manifested in the shape of urban planning concepts like the "garden city," showcasing how the European model shaped the ideal of what a proper city should look like. The desire for green spaces became an impossible and expensive project in the desert. These efforts were inspired by colonial ideals of transforming warm regions and aligned with the Judeo-Christian vision of restoring Palestine to its biblical Edenic state as part of the Jewish settlement project. Furthermore, architects often rejected indigenous techniques, despite praising their resilience, instead building according to Western fashions. For example, European settlers were accustomed to and desired bigger windows, while in Palestine's climate it was often better to use small or no window at all. These fashions would often result in unbearable living conditions in summer. Similar trends could be found in agricultural practices, by introducing foreign crops and novel irrigation technologies. Zionist environmental strategies, shaped by European and colonial training, played a crucial role in justifying land appropriation and reinforcing imbalanced power dynamics between Jews and Arabs (Hughes et al. 2022). These innovations aimed to sustain the Jewish community while surpassing Palestinian agricultural practices and asserting dominance (Novick 2023).

An interesting aspect of the book was the Zionist biblical narratives, particularly descriptions of the Land of Israel as a “land of milk and honey”, which were instrumental in shaping early Zionist imaginations of Palestine’s climate. This romanticized vision fostered a connection between the Jewish people and the land, reinforcing claims of autochthony and indigeneity. By framing the landscape through a biblical lens, Zionist settlers positioned their efforts as a reclamation of a sacred heritage rather than as a colonial enterprise (Rouhana 2021). However, Cohen contrasts these idealized biblical visions with settlers’ lived experiences upon arrival in Palestine, where they encountered a land marked by aridity, heat, and ecological challenges. This discrepancy led to a shift in Zionist thinking, where initial rhetoric of a harmonious return gave way to an emphasis on overcoming the land’s perceived deficiencies through science and modernization.

Cohen shows how environment and climate become constructs of settler-colonial ideologies. Scholarship in decolonial ecology is a quickly evolving field, establishing a link between the exploitation of nature and peoples. One of these thinkers, Malcolm Ferdinand (2022), has gone on to call this colonial inhabitation, which describes the relationship between the colonizer and human and non-human other. It links geographical subordination, the exploitation of land and nature, and the othercide of those already inhabiting the land (Ferdinand 2022). Especially the ideological link between the subordination of humans and nature, and the construction of difference in the name of capitalism may have been very apt to make clearer in this book. Drawing these insights into the present would greatly add to the relevance of the book as well, as the continuities of energy extractivism are now starting to emerge in green energy (Hamouchene and Sandwell 2023).

In conclusion, *New Under the Sun* is a highly relevant study that provides new insights into the environmental dimensions of Zionist settler colonialism. By situating Zionist climate knowledge within a global colonial context and emphasizing the interconnectedness of humans and non-humans, Cohen offers a nuanced analysis that provides an abundance of food for thought about scientific research and its material consequences—an analysis which might be important to grasp for everybody. This book not only enriches our understanding of the Zionist project but also provides valuable insights into the broader intersections of climate, knowledge, and power in the modern world.

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