

COLONIALISM AND THE SCIENCE OF RACE DIFFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

Australian sociologists have given limited attention to scientific race theory and its historical relevance to the conditions of Indigenous peoples, leaving the work to historians and anthropologists, such as Elkin (1931), Berndt (1971), Ryan (1981), Beckett (1988), Cowlishaw (1988 and 1990), Reynolds (1989, 2000 and 2001), and Morris (1992 and 1997) Rowse (1994), Markus (1994), Kapferer (1995) and Glover (1998). Scientific race theory normalised social and biological theories of natural selection in scholarly and popular discourse, creating a classificatory system. This classificatory system formed the basis of the construction of an inferior other in colonising discourses, normalising the superiority of the dominant or colonising culture. The *science of race difference* is relevant to sociology in terms of how it gave rise to a particular way of viewing the Indigenous 'other' that resulted in certain practices and organising strategies that controlled, excluded and marginalised the Indigenous 'other' from Australian society. The purpose of the paper is, therefore, to reflect on what I refer to as the *science of race difference* and its relevance to the categorisation of the Indigenous peoples as 'other'.

1 INTRODUCTION

It gives me concern to have been forced to destroy any of these people, particularly as I have no doubt of their having been cruelly treated by some of the first settlers who went out there; however, had I not taken this step, every prospect of advantage which the colony might expect to derive from settlement formed on the banks of so fine a river as the Hawkesbury would be at an end (Paterson, 1795).

The first one hundred and forty years of Australian history was marked by conflict and dispossession, the taking of Indigenous land, the destroying of food and antagonism to their habits and traditions characterised the specific form of settler colonialism that took root in Australia (Reynolds, 1989; Markus, 1994; & Tatz, 1999). Despite the presence of Indigenous peoples, the British colonial authorities declared Australia *terra nullius*, which removed any legal recognition of pre-existing Indigenous institutions. From the outset, the Indigenous peoples were denied any space officially to negotiate the terms of their existence. The colonial form of sovereignty and the mode of rapid land appropriation did much to shape conflictual colonial relations between the pre-existing Indigenous peoples and the colonising settlers. Dispossession, dispersal and marginalisation of the Indigenous population were the major

consequences of colonial conquest. Unlike in New Zealand, Canada and the United States, no treaty was entered into. The Indigenous peoples were given no rights, and these events occurred in the context where Indigenous people had little protection except, ambivalently, British common law. According to principles of British common law and property ownership, the Indigenous peoples were considered not to own the land, and, therefore, Australia was considered uninhabited and settled rather than conquered. Thus, the colonisation of Australia occurred under the legal *aegis* of *terra nullius*, and practices of dispossession emanated from the principle resulting in not only the physical removal of Indigenous people from their land but the exclusion, control, and destruction of Indigenous people (Hage, 2001: 336). The landmass became a possession of the British crown.

As Paterson's statement indicates, colonialism sought to legitimate its own domination. Land clearance for pastoralism, the mainstay of the colonial economy, was often based on the belief that Aborigines were 'vermin', 'scarcely human' and 'wild animals' (Glover, 1998; Tatz, 1999). In other cases it was because Aborigines were considered a 'pest' or 'nuisance' as they stood in the way of the rapid expansion of the British colony (Tatz, 1999). Even best intentioned practices towards Aborigines were paternalistic in nature and based on notions of biological, social and cultural inferiority – Indigenous peoples' semi-nomadic way of life was interpreted as 'primitive' and 'uncivilized' – and reflected scientific beliefs. Such beliefs provided white society with a comforting ideology that absolved them of guilt and turned control and exploitation into moral acts (Glover, 1998: 79). While the colonial relationships varied from region to region and the various colonial stories describe many differing experiences of contact between the white colonisers and the Indigenous population, from 1788 all Indigenous people became subjects of an overarching colonial order in which the white colonisers, settlers and administrators were setting out to conquer Australia (Rowse, 1994: 187).

Colonialism was, therefore, also a social and cultural process, whereby the colonisers legitimated conquest by asserting the alleged inferiority of the colonised. The colonial order divided the social world creating two distinct realms: European/Native or white/black. In 19th Century Australia, the emergence of theories of race, evolution, of biological and cultural inferiority served this function well. Western scholarship measured and classified the Indigenous 'other' in relation to Europeans from the civilised West – these studies concluded that the Aborigine was so culturally, socially and biologically inferior that they would eventually die out. Settler colonialism in Australia was, thus, underpinned by a *science of 'race' difference*.

2 DISCUSSION

2.1 THE SCIENCE OF RACE DIFFERENCE

Evolutionary ways of thought heavily influenced scientific preoccupations with the Indigenous other. As Aborigines were denied a place within the new nation, the world of 'science', for example, Durkheim's *The Elementary forms of the Religious Life* (1912 republished 1971), Freud's

Totem and Taboo (1913 republished 1950), and Malinowski's *The Family among the Australian Aborigines* (1913 republished 1963), took them up as embodying the most 'primitive' or elementary society. In particular, Morgan's *Systems or Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1870 republished 1971)⁴ and Fison and Howett's *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* (1880)⁵ were the two major ethnologies that formed the basis of a comparative science of human social institutions (Stanner, 1968: 34). The later was a study of Australian Aborigines, which posited that Aborigines had the 'lowest level' of Morgan's kinship type (Fison and Howitt, 1880, cited in Cowlishaw, 1988: 62). Spencer's *The northern tribes of Central Australia* (1904) focused not only on kinship, but also on religion - the most 'primitive' form of religion was found to exist in Central Australia (Cowlishaw, 1988: 62). Spencer's (cited in Fesl, 1992: 22) earlier work set out the underlying evolutionary discourse. As Stanner (1968: 36) notes, the great interpreters, who had much to say about the Aborigines - Frazer (1887, 1909), Lang (1865), Durkheim (1912) and Freud (1919 republished 1950) were attracted to this work because of this primitivism. They argued that Aboriginal inferiority was axiomatic, and 'represented the progressive course of the human race in which European man was a standard of perfection against which to measure the inferiority of others' (Glover, 1998: 90). Glover (1998: 89) notes: 'Inferior now meant ancestral, and the Aboriginal became a living fossil of Paleolithic mankind, and a unique picture of an early stage in European history ... Australia's archaic forms of plant, animal and human life presented, in Berry's phrase, a prototype of Conan Doyle's *Lost World*'.⁶ As Berndt (1971: 20) argues: 'In effect, the white arrogated to himself the right to decide that the black should be given no new opportunity to change, either in his own environment or in white society'. The intent, as Tatz (1999: 28) argues, was '...to await the natural death of the full-blood peoples and to socially engineer the disappearance, forever, of all those natives of Aboriginal origin'.

The evolutionary theories and methods of measuring Aborigines bodies and bones were seen as an appropriate scientific practice by academics, supporting and perpetuating the notion that the Aborigine was the most primitive form of mankind. Importantly, they founded such beliefs on the division of the human species into a hierarchy of discrete groups by academics, particularly physical anthropologist (such as Berry), anatomists and craniologists who measured cranial capacity and cephalic index.⁷ So too, did the studies on the social character of Aborigines conducted, for example, by surveyors, magistrates, medical officers, and zoologists (Cowlishaw, 1988: 61-62). Such discursive practices served to confirm and legitimise these beliefs (Glover, 1998: 69). As Glover (1998: 70) notes, the resilience of racist conclusions in the face of contradictory data shows the way in which *a priori* notions of black inferiority were built into the methodology of such studies. Thus, rooted in a colonial discourse, the European scientist constructed their own inferiorising conclusions of Aboriginal culture and origins. The Aboriginal race attained the prominent position in the *science of race difference* as the most primitive form of human life. Indeed, it followed that Aboriginal society represented a weaker race and would eventually die out.

The *science of race difference* developed into a mainstream belief system that became embedded in discursive and political practices. Colonialism was, thus, underpinned by an ideology of inferiorising difference (Beckett 1988). As Beckett (1988: 120) states,

A colonial order arises when the State has annexed a territory formally and systematically discriminates between the conquering invaders and the subject indigenes in such a way as to entrench the difference in some form of ideology that justifies the domination of the Indigenous population in terms of race, mentality, moral qualities, cultural advancement, religion or historic destiny (quoted in Rowse, 1994: 189).

White scientists, parliamentarians, administrators and the press constructed Aboriginal people as a biologically, socially and culturally inferior race – as the most primitive form of mankind. Glover (1998: 88) argues that: 'the idea that surviving primitive peoples represented earlier stages in the development of modern society had its roots in the Enlightenment'.³ To demonstrate, in 1876 the evolutionist Henry Rusden expressed the following sentiments:

The survival of the fittest means that might - wisely used - is right. And thus we invoke and remorselessly fulfil the inexorable law of natural selection (or demand and supply), when exterminating the inferior Australian or Maori races, and we appropriate patrimony as coolly as Ahab did the vineyard of Naboth, though in diametrical opposition to all our favourite theories of right and justice - thus proved to be unnatural and false. The world is better for it; and would be incalculably better still, were we loyally to accept the lesson thus taught by nature, and consistently to apply the same principle to our conventional practice: by preserving the varieties most perfect in every way, protecting the propagation of the imprudent, the diseased, the defective, and the criminal. Thus we surely lower the average of, and tend to destroy, the human race, almost as effectively as if we were openly to resort to communism (quoted in Hollinsworth, 1998: 90).

Here Rusden draws on biblical, social and biological representations to underpin his reason, science and rationality and exonerate British colonialism. It was a common argument that justified the neglect of Aborigines, as well as the atrocities committed to produce a new colonial order.

The belief that the Indigenous other was inferior or lesser than the white colonisers emerged from the natural facts of observation that were seen as objective, neutral and innocent. Credibility and status was given to scientific method and the information generated from science (Murphy and Choi 1997: 59). A scientific method that was not rigorous, exact and simply a servant of the truth, instead, in the context of colonial expansion, science legitimates dominant values in a way that is beyond criticism.

2.1.1 THE SCIENCE OF RACE DIFFERENCE AND POPULAR DISCOURSE

The *science of race difference* brought together a number of divergent popular discourses and pressed them into the world of science. Numerous discourses were present throughout the emerging colonies or states that then made up Australia, and were prevalent throughout the 19th century. Such representations varied in nature, however, whites became complicit in the othering, primitivising and devaluing of Indigenous peoples.

The uniformity of this discursive representation is evident through the treatment of Aborigines in the press. On 6 August 1867, the editor of the Rockhampton Bulletin, published in the state of Queensland, expressed his concerns that the inevitable disappearance of Aborigines was used to justify the violence against them:

whilst we regard the disappearance of the black race before the face of white man as an inevitable fact to which we must of necessity submit as one of the conditions of successful colonisation, we must protect in the name of humanity and justice against seeking to attain this end by a ruthless and indiscriminate extermination of the doomed race. Their extinction is only a matter of time, and no unnecessary cruelty should be used to effect a result which the operation of natural causes will certainly accomplish (cited in Reynolds, 2001: 116).

The relegation of Aboriginal society to a pre-modern past is in keeping with the emerging central assumptions about modernity of historical progress and the greater certainty of scientific knowledge. White colonisation is considered an inevitable and natural evolutionary act. Violence is rendered, in effect, an unnecessarily uncharitable act given that Aborigines are a doomed race because of their inherent inferiority.

Likewise, the editorial in *The Age*, published in the state of Victoria, in January 1888 demonstrates, similar press representations of the Indigenous 'other':

It seems a law of nature that where two races whose stages of progression differ greatly are brought into contact, the inferior race is doomed to whither and disappear ... The process seems to be in accordance with a natural law which, however it may clash with human benevolence, is clearly beneficial to mankind at large by providing for the survival of the fittest ... It may be doubted whether the Australian Aborigine would ever have advanced much beyond the status of Neolithic races in which we found him, and we need not therefore lament his disappearance (quoted in Hollinsworth, 1998: 91-92).

What is a social and political process is rendered a natural one. Colonialism is no longer an act of imperialism, but an inevitable act of nature. Not only is political discourse hiding in a scientific dress, but also the naturalisation of colonial relations (Foucault 1976). Such discourses

built-up the progression of white Europeans compared to the Indigenous occupants reduced to the principles of a natural law of selection, which posited that races moved through different developmental stages from the primitive to the civilised. Because Aborigines had not advanced beyond this primitive stage, it was believed that there was no hope for their long-term survival. Indigenous Australians became the premodern 'other' of a modern British settler society with its attendant beliefs in historical and material progress, facts confirmed by the certitude of scientific knowledge.

By the turn of the century, the material progress of the newly Federated nation was being lionised in foundation myths about nation and its people. James Collier's historical book, *The Pastoral Age in the Australasia* (1911), further demonstrates that the *science of 'race' difference* underpinned a belief in a biological inferiority that was deeply ingrained in the white European psyche, and the prevalence of the belief that Aborigines would naturally die out thus absolving white Australia of any guilt over its colonising practices:

The last of the continents was converted from a black to a white. With the disappearance of the (I)ndigenous dark race and the advent of the more robust of the fair races it was definitely launched on its career as a rival and leader of other continental peoples. ...There can be no question of right or wrong in such a case. The only right is that of superiority of race, and the greater inherent capabilities on the part of whites; the only wrong on the part of the blacks is their all-round inferiority and their pastures ... Their disappearance was a natural necessity. It came about in obedience to natural law. It was effected by natural processes and followed on the lines of the substitution of vegetal and animal species all over the world (Collier quoted in Hollinsworth, 1998: 92).

The idea of modern Australia being converted into a white nation operates in accordance with the laws of natural selection. As Paine (2000: 77) proposes: this is a 'construction bestowed by the Settler world in its own understanding - an understanding of itself through the contrastive portraiture of the Aboriginal world'. Demonstrating how, as Morris (1997:18) notes: 'The representation of otherness imposes a truth which attributes to Aborigines an essential being and, in effect, denies the social reality of their existence ... It is this fixity which renders them a knowable and recognisable totality'. Aboriginal people's racial and cultural inferiority was measured against white modernity's economic, social and cultural indicators. It involves not only white economic, social and cultural practices, but also the physical whitening of the landscape with superior animals and vegetal species. White superiority is constituted by its comparison to a black inferiority. The Indigenous other is constructed into a generic racialised Aborigine - the subaltern considered inferior and uncivilised.

The various legislation that was brought into force to protect Aborigines in the 1840s was 'predicated on the philosophy of 'soothing the dying

pillow' of a race near extinction' - philosophies premised on Social Darwinism or scientific race theory (Tatz, 1999: 17-18).² Protection amounted to separation and incarceration. Baldwin Spencer projected, for example, in 1899 that shortly all that would need to be done was to gather 'the few remnants of the tribe into some mission stations where the path to final extinction may be made as pleasant as possible' (Spencer, quoted in Reynolds, 2001: 148).

Later, the *science of race difference* heavily influenced white parliamentary and administrators construction of the rapidly growing 'half-caste population' in the late 1920s/1930s. Aboriginality was essentialised as a primordial stage of whiteness, and, thus, mixed-bloods were determined to be not Aboriginal, but also not quite white. Paine (2000: 85) asserts, the dilution of blood and subsequent loss of Aboriginality supported unilinear evolutionism; it was hypothesized that it would be several generations until Aboriginality could be completely bred out making those of Indigenous descent white. Whites continued to define the conditions of what it meant to be Aboriginal. In Australia, Neville's book, *Australia's Coloured Minority: It's Place in the Community*, set out this proposition in photographically evidenced detail.

Political and scientific debate revolved around the future of the 'mixed blood'. Spencer, Bleakley, Cook, and Neville, Commonwealth administrators for various States and Territories, led the political debate about miscegenation (Cook, 1971: 21 & Reynolds, 2001: 149). Baldwin Spencer, who had in 1899 declared that it would only be 'a few years before they are extinct' (Reynolds, 2001: 148), now speaking for the Commonwealth administration argued that mixed-blood children could never be admitted into 'white' society preferring that they be raised as full bloods with their mothers (Berndt, 1971: 21). Whereas, Cook pushed for the removal of mixed-blood children from Aboriginal camps, to be reared in hostels where they would be trained to take on menial positions in 'white' society, (Cook, 1971: 20). It was not the existence of Aborigines, but the consequences of miscegenation that was the central problem of administrators; it posed a threat to the ideal of White Australia.

The *science of race difference* continued to influence public administration of Aborigines and policy concerning Aborigines up until the late 1940s. Following Federation, Aboriginal people were not only excluded from voting. There were a number of Commonwealth 'white' labour only laws (Summers, 2000: 8). The *Posts and Telegraphs Act 1901* required that only white labour could be employed in the carriage of mail. The *Excise Tariff Act 1902* set out that a rebate for sugar cane and beet growers was on the provision that 'white labour only has been employed'. The *Sugar Bounty Act 1903* legislated that payment of a bounty to growers of sugar cane and beet would only be paid if the sugar cane and beet had been grown on land that had been cultivated by 'white' labour. The *Invalid and Old-age Pension Act 1908* stipulated that not only that '[A]boriginal natives of Australia' could not receive an old-age pension, but they could not qualify for an Invalid pension. (Summers, 2000: 8-9)

Biological definitions defined Aboriginal identity. Policy was oriented towards the 'protection' by the State, but excluded Aboriginal people from citizenship and the social rights of the modern State. Importantly though, Aboriginal people had no rights in the new nation. There was no treaty or agreements entered into with the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. Progressively the Aboriginal peoples were dispossessed from their land, placed on missions and became dependent upon the state governments for their basic survival. They were wards of the states, and subject to the laws of those same states. Such policies were premised on biological inferiority supported by the *science of race difference*.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Colonialism was never simply an economic, political and social process, but also a cultural and symbolic one. The process of constructing an inferior other in colonising discourses normalised the superiority of the dominant or colonising culture. The *science of race difference* constructed a hierarchical structure of inferior and superior cultures, as well as exposing the purpose of attaching negative values to those cultures that differ from the norm (Murphy and Choi, 1997). The *science of race difference* asserted specific races were more pure, advanced and indicative of modern civilisation, and was a form of formalism that was used to inferiorise and marginalise the Indigenous other (Murphy and Choi, 1997: 22). The *science of race difference* was based on the normalisation of natural selection in scholarly and popular discourse. It created a classificatory system in which the 'white' world was valued and normalised, and one that assigned the Indigenous other to a premodern past, outside and beyond the intervention of social redemption. Thus, the metaphysics of race was a metaphysics of domination (Murphy and Choi, 1997: 2-3). The *science of race difference* has present day meaning. As indicated above, the laws, policies and practices of separation and protection, for example, were based on the *science of race difference*, resulting in the removal of Indigenous people from country and the removal of children of mixed blood from their families and communities, which continue to have effect the legal, political, economic, social and cultural status of Indigenous peoples of Australia today.

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