

# Culture Crisis

Anthropology and Politics  
in Aboriginal Australia



Edited by Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson

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# **Culture Crisis**

ANTHROPOLOGY AND POLITICS IN ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA

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## Contributors

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GILLIAN COWLISHAW holds an ARC Australian Professorial Fellowship at the University of Sydney. Her recent publications include *Blackfellas, Whitefellas and the Hidden Injuries of Race* and *The City's Outback*, the latter an adventurous ethnography that pursues Indigeneity in western Sydney.

MELINDA HINKSON teaches social anthropology and is convenor of the Visual Culture Research program in the Research School of Humanities and the Arts, the Australian National University. Among her recent publications are *An Appreciation of Difference: WEH Stanner and Aboriginal Australia* (co-edited with Jeremy Beckett) and *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia* (co-edited with Jon Altman).

EMMA KOWAL is a cultural anthropologist of White anti-racism and Indigenous governance in Australia, with a background in clinical medicine and public health research. She is the co-editor of *Moving Anthropology: Critical Indigenous Studies* and her work has been published in *American Anthropologist*, *Social Science and Medicine*, *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* and in national and international medical journals. She is currently a National Health and Medical Research Council postdoctoral fellow in anthropology at the University of Melbourne.

MARCIA LANGTON is professor of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne. She is a descendant of the Yiman and Bijarra peoples of Queensland. She is an anthropologist

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ANDREW LATTAS is professor in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Bergen, Norway. His PhD in anthropology was on early colonial Australian history. He has published extensively on race relations in contemporary Australia and most recently on the 2005 Cronulla riot. His extensive fieldwork in Papua New Guinea has resulted in two books and numerous articles on masks, gender relations, race relations and millenarian movements. His first book, *Cultures of Secrecy*, was on cargo cults and his forthcoming book, *Dreams, Madness and Fairy Tales*, is on everyday forms of utopia and dystopia in Papua New Guinea.

TESS LEA is associate professor of anthropology at Charles Darwin University, where she founded the School for Social and Policy Research to foster applied and theoretical analyses on life in north Australia. She studies the interface between people and things in regional and remote Australia. A former ministerial adviser, she has also studied bureaucracies ethnographically. Her book *Bureaucrats and Bleeding Hearts, Indigenous Health in Northern Australia* examines the culture of health policy and service provision from the inside out.

FRANCESCA MERLAN is professor of anthropology at the Australian National University. She has over thirty years' familiarity with Indigenous communities and questions of social change and adaptation in the Northern Territory, and researches and writes about these and related issues elsewhere in Australia, in Papua New Guinea and in Europe.

BARRY MORRIS is a senior lecturer in anthropology at the University of Newcastle. He has published widely in national and international journals, is the author of *Domesticating Resistance: The Dhan-gadi Aborigines and the Australian State*, and co-editor of *Race Matters: Indigenous Australians and 'Our' Society* (with Gillian Cowlshaw) and *Expert Knowledge: First World Peoples, Consultancy, and Anthropology* (with Rohan Bastin).

YASMINE MUSHARBASH spent over three years of participant observation in the Warlpiri camps of Yuendumu, as a postgraduate of the Australian National University and postdoctoral fellow with the University of Western Australia. She is the author of *Yuendumu Everyday: Contemporary Life in Remote Aboriginal Australia* and is currently a lecturer with the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney.

NICOLAS PETERSON is a professor of anthropology in the School of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Australian National University. His main areas of fieldwork have been in northeast Arnhem Land and the Tanami Desert. His research interests include economic anthropology, land and marine tenure, fourth world people and the state. Since working for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Land Rights as its research officer, he has been

involved in the preparation of a dozen land and native title claims. Recent publications include the compiled and introduced book *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land*, and *The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections*, co-edited with Lindy Allen and Louis Hamby.

ELIZABETH A. POVINELLI is professor of anthropology and gender studies at Columbia University where she is also director of the Institute for Research on Women and Gender. Povinelli is the author of three books, the latest being *The Empire of Love*. She was editor of *Public Culture* from 2000 to 2004 and is currently its senior editor.

TIM ROWSE is a professorial fellow in the Centre for Citizenship and Public Policy at the University of Western Sydney (Bankstown). In 2002, he published an overview of the work of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, *Indigenous Futures: Choice and Development for Aboriginal and Islander Australia*. His most recent book (with Murray Goot) is *Divided Nation? Indigenous Affairs and the Imagined Public*. His current research is on the use of official statistics in the representation of Indigenous interests.



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## A short note on terms used

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We have attempted to limit the use of abbreviations and acronyms used in the essays in this book. While some authors refer to the Northern Territory Emergency Response (or NTER) Intervention, the Northern Territory or NT Intervention or just the Intervention (capitalised), they all refer to the same set of processes initiated in 21 June 2007.

Throughout the book the adjectives Indigenous and Aboriginal, capitalised, are used interchangeably and refer to the descendants of Australia's First Peoples. Indigenous refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and so is more inclusive than Aboriginal Australians. The lower case use of the adjective indigenous refers to indigenous peoples globally.

In individual essays a few abbreviations are used and these are defined within each essay.

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## Preface

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This volume had its genesis in the announcement of the theme for the 2009 annual meeting of the Australian Anthropological Society: 'The Ethics and Politics of Engagement'. The synopsis calling for session proposals resonated strongly with issues we had been contemplating. Particularly appealing were the aspirations of the Macquarie University hosts of the conference to attract contributions that would grapple with the difficult issue of how to make 'demonstrable contributions outside the walls of academe' and the ethical and political debates that arise when anthropologists seek 'to balance our conflicting obligations with our own aspirations as scholars, activists and concerned citizens'. Reference was made to the involvement of anthropologists in public discussions of the Northern Territory Intervention. Yet at the time of the call for papers, in March 2009, we were not convinced that anthropologists had in fact been sufficiently engaged in such public discussions. This seemed an ideal opportunity to explore why this had been the case.

It is not that long ago, on 21 June 2007, that John Howard and Mal Brough declared a 'national emergency' in respect of widespread allegations of child sexual abuse that had been detailed in the Anderson and Wild *Little Children are Sacred* report, and announced the Northern Territory Emergency Response Intervention. In mobilising the army as the front-line of a federal government campaign framed to 'stabilise and normalise' remote communities, the Intervention sparked a widespread public debate even though there was political bipartisanship between the Howard government and the Rudd opposition. At that time we were approached by Arena Publications to edit a book that was produced unashamedly as an urgent critical response. The ensuing book, *Coercive Reconciliation*, was published in September 2007 and contained thirty essays, half of them by Indigenous scholars and activists, eight of them by anthropologists, exploring aspects of the Intervention from a range of perspectives. At the time we expected that the book would itself spark lively debate. Yet while the first print run sold quickly and a second printing was produced, *Coercive Reconciliation* received little commentary. Especially quiet in the wake of the Intervention were anthropologists, a point remarked upon by long-time and astute commentator on Aboriginal affairs, Jack Waterford, when he launched the book in Canberra.

In proposing a session 'Crisis of culture: The politics of engagement with remote Aboriginal Australia', with a program of speakers who were invited, we highlighted the debates around the Northern Territory Intervention and Aboriginal affairs policy more broadly, but with a specific interest in the way in which through these debates 'culture' was becoming 'a new kind of object – a site of intense, future focused contestation'. We were particularly interested to have contributors reflect upon the conundrum faced by anthropologists of being 'increasingly drawn to speak to and for imagined futures of Aboriginal people', and to also reflect upon the ethical implications of this for our responsibilities to the people with whom we work and to the discipline itself.

The session was concerned to make sense of the range of anthropological responses to the Northern Territory Intervention, but also to look beyond the contested politics of the present to explore how current anthropology's apparent ambivalence might be understood in the longer tradition of the discipline as well as in the history of the state's governing of its citizenry.

Our session and speakers list was finalised in May 2009, with our having proposed a broad theme that we asked each contributor to address. Two months later Peter Sutton's *The Politics of Suffering* was published. We were aware that the book was forthcoming and had invited Peter Sutton to participate in our session, but he had declined indicating that he would have his say in his book. With its publication anthropologists had the book that would spark public debate among themselves. In the four months leading up to the Macquarie conference the Australian Anthropological Society's email list was alive with debate about the issues raised by Sutton. Once it became clear that *The Politics of Suffering* would constitute a central focus of the session, we again invited Peter to participate but he again declined.

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This is a somewhat unusual book because its possibility was negotiated prior to the conference and all contributors were encouraged to prepare an essay for review by their peers to ensure the volume's early completion. All paper givers are included in this volume, with two additions. Tess Lea was to be in Sydney, but unexpectedly had to withdraw. Francesca Merlan was to be overseas at the time of the conference, but was keen to participate in the book project. After the conference we invited Andrew Lattas and Barry Morris to provide an essay each, but they preferred to co-author a slightly longer piece, the only jointly authored essay in the book.

The Macquarie conference was held in early December 2009 and the manuscript of this book was delivered to UNSW Press in mid-March 2010. In completing the book so quickly we have received terrific institutional and collegial support. First, of course, we thank our contributors. We would also like to thank the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research for financial assistance provided to get diagrams professionally drawn and to have the book expertly indexed. We hope that this ends up as a royalties-contingent loan rather than a grant. The Centre also contributed towards the cost of travel for one of our contributors: Elizabeth Povinelli, who flew from Columbia University especially for the session. We thank Greg Downey and Malcolm Haddon from Macquarie University for their organisational assistance. At the Centre we also received support from John Hughes with technical issues, Gillian Cosgrove with expert map work and Susie Russell with referencing assistance. Jon Altman particularly thanks Denise Steele who operated as an effective, but ever diplomatic, gatekeeper just to give him some uninterrupted space to focus on this project.

The idea of the book from the conference session was first raised with Phillipa McGuinness on 3 April 2009, coincidentally the day that the Rudd government belatedly supported the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. She responded with enthusiasm to the prospect of an edited volume that commercial publishers today generally shun. We hope sales repay her faith. In the production of the book we would like to thank Phillipa, Heather Cam and Chantal Gibbs, Carla Taines for copyediting, Anne Savage for proofreading, and Jon Jermeij for professional indexing.

Jon Altman  
Melinda Hinkson

# Introduction: Anthropology and the culture wars

Melinda Hinkson<sup>1</sup>

The title of this collection, *Culture Crisis*, refers to a series of debates occurring simultaneously in two arenas: in public attention to the circumstances of Aboriginal people living in areas of Australia described as 'remote', and in scholarly disagreement among anthropologists over how we should interpret and respond to these circumstances. Over the past decade an increasingly critical public perspective on remote Aboriginal Australia has emerged that identifies a broad social situation in crisis and takes aim at the previous bipartisan policy approach of self-determination. The 'culture wars', as we might refer to the wide-ranging disagreements over policy directions for remote Aboriginal Australia that have gathered pace since the mid-1990s, make 'culture' an object of critical attention. Matters of government policy are increasingly being framed by suggestions that Aboriginal people need to undergo forms of cultural redevelopment. The work of anthropologists is implicated in these debates in diverse and significant ways. The fourteen essays that follow – all by anthropologists – bring a range of perspectives to bear on the current plight of remote Aboriginal Australia and anthropology's engagement with that plight.

While the issues under focus in this book have had a long gestation, the debates around them have recently acquired a new vigour and urgency. Against the backdrop of the Northern Territory Intervention and following the publication in July 2009 of Peter Sutton's book *The Politics of Suffering*, a complex, passionately argued and politically riven set of discussions galvanised the attention of the Australian anthropological community. The disagreements, largely played out in the semi-private arena of an email list maintained for members of the Australian Anthropological Society, cut in many directions. In summary form they operate at three levels – first, the question of whether we accept that notions of crisis and suffering adequately represent the circumstances of remote communities; second, where we may recognise a desperate situation we may disagree over the interpretation of cause; and third, we disagree, often passionately, over how contemporary circumstances should be responded to. Here the Northern Territory Intervention has been a lightning rod for much debate – is unilateral governmental intervention warranted and to what ends? Have anthropologists (along with others) been 'wedged' between denying there is a desperate problem and acceding to the terms of the Intervention?

In his essay in this volume Jeremy Beckett identifies an important element of the dilemma facing Australianist anthropologists. In exploring the terms of a 'national anthropology', Beckett observes that for scholars who are also citizens of a nation, the distinction between responsibility to our disciplinary field and to our fellow citizens is not easily drawn. Despite appeals to the contrary, anthropologists do not simply produce 'objective' knowledge of a people's way of life; anthropological knowledge is produced in dialogue – whether consciously or not – with a wider field of public cultural concern and policy-making. The questions we pose, the themes we pursue and the concepts we deploy to describe and analyse social phenomena all arise in interaction with a larger set of conversations and political

processes occurring at the national level.

From one angle this is the charge levelled by Peter Sutton in his controversial and widely read book. For thirty years, Sutton argues, anthropologists (with notable exceptions) and the Australian populace more broadly were captured or constrained by a 'liberal consensus' that privileged a commitment to abstract notions of 'culture' and 'rights' above concern for the plight of living persons. One effect of the culture wars, to which Sutton's book is a significant recent contribution, has been to turn anthropologists inward, to reflect upon the history and politics of our own practice. Was the focus of anthropology from the 1970s to the 1990s framed too heavily by the institutions of land rights and native title? Was our work over-determined by the policy approach of self-determination? Did we fail to shine a light on the casualties of that era? Conversely, others ask to what extent are anthropologists such as Sutton simply reproducing the situation they criticise, committing themselves not to the transcendence of idealism in favour of pragmatism, as they would have it, but rather to the latest ideologically driven governmental project to 'improve' the lives of Aboriginal people? What is at stake in anthropology's capacity to grapple with the wider social field of Aboriginal experience? One aim of this book is to pose difficult questions such as these, and to consider why it is that Australianist anthropology – the scholarly discipline with perhaps the most intimate first-hand experience of the circumstances of remote living Aboriginal people – came so late and so reluctantly to the current public debate concerning their plight. In this brief introductory essay it is not my intention to address these questions directly – the essays that follow take up this task. Rather, I attempt to establish some context for understanding the situation in which Australianist anthropologists find themselves today.

## **ANTHROPOLOGY'S CRISES**

First we need briefly to step back and consider the larger disciplinary arena in which Australian anthropology developed across the twentieth century. At one level talk of a current 'crisis' can be dismissed – anthropology can be said to have been in a near permanent state of 'crisis' since its inception, as its key protagonists in every era waged spirited debates among themselves over how to characterise the primary conceptual focus of their enterprise. Debate over the definition and deployment of the concept of 'culture', for example, has filled scores of books and been the subject of many review essays. But in the period since the Second World War the discipline has undergone two particularly important moments of deep and critical reflection in response to the changing circumstances of the social world it seeks to describe and analyse. The first of these followed the end of Empire and postwar devolution of various degrees of self-governance to the colonised peoples of Africa, Asia and the Pacific. Anthropologists – so far as they had previously done so – could no longer avoid the fact that their discipline was implicated in complex ways in colonial rule. Of course, notable anthropologists had for decades been questioning the orthodoxies of their era, but as development thinking shifted it brought with it a shifting ground for the discipline as a whole. The emergence of postcolonial critique and a vocal and politicised indigenous leadership who would now speak for themselves, especially in those countries that were seeking independence, presented a direct challenge to what in an earlier era had been the presumed authority of the anthropologist. Australian and other fourth world indigenous voices of dissent grew stronger and louder, particularly from the 1960s, feeding directly into

the processes that would eventuate in self-determination.

The 1980s ushered in a second major crisis, with the theoretical turn of poststructuralism that refocused scholarly attention at the level of subjective experience, fracturing the once solid ground of positivist objectivity and, along with it, any idea that the practice of ethnography simply involved going to a 'field' to collect 'facts' which would be brought home and 'written up'. This paradigm shift has forced anthropologists to reconsider the way they understand broad social processes, so that ideas of what it is to be human can no longer be straightforwardly described in the discrete terms of 'a culture', for example, but relationally in terms of wider and multi-stranded processes and interactions.

Across the subsequent decades these political and intellectual crises have influenced Australianist anthropology in ways that are uneven and not always obvious. Since its inception, the discipline has existed in a state of complex symbiotic dependency with government: anthropologists have been materially and practically dependent on state support to fund research, and the direction anthropological work has taken in any particular period has been crucially influenced by state needs for certain kinds of information with which to govern its Indigenous populace.

In the present, research in Aboriginal Australia is conducted from diverse and divergent perspectives, but two broad approaches might be identified. The first is classicism, an approach guided by the principles of structural-functionalism that characterised British anthropology for the first half of the twentieth century and continued to assert an unparalleled influence over anthropological endeavour for decades beyond that. Classicism is concerned with the study of classical social institutions, language, kinship, land tenure, cosmology, and takes hold of indigenous social fields as relatively autonomous from the wider society. With its emphasis on cultural continuity, classicism historically showed no interest in the most dispossessed indigenous communities; these were regarded as having 'lost their culture'. The classical approach, as a number of the essays that follow observe, has been further fostered and institutionalised since the 1970s through the state's formulation – aided by anthropologists – of land rights and native title processes.

The second approach – which itself encompasses a diverse field of scholarly perspectives and interests – we might refer to as interculturalism. Interculturalist analyses take seriously the need to reconfigure anthropological scholarship in the wake of postcolonial and poststructural critique. They comprehend the social in terms of intersecting processes to be identified and analysed, rather than place-based communities or sets of indigenous cultural practices to be straightforwardly described. It needs to be stressed that the variety of approaches that might be gathered under the term interculturalism have emerged, and continue to emerge, gradually. Further, I am not suggesting that anthropologists can simply be sorted according to one or other of these approaches; the development and mobilisation of interpretive perspectives is an evolving and contingent process.

## **ANTHROPOLOGY IN PERSPECTIVE**

The distinctive method of anthropology places its practitioners in intimate, longstanding relations with the people with whom we work. Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the founding figures of modern British anthropology and the methods of fieldwork, argued in the early twentieth century that the task of the anthropologist was 'to grasp the native point of view',

to acquire a sense of how the social world was ordered from the perspective of those with whom we work. Anthropology in Britain, and more explicitly in the United States, was founded on this broad premise of cultural relativism and the idea that diverse cultural practices might be comprehended without subjecting them to judgment.

For those of us whose research is based in kin-based societies, something along the lines of a 'native point of view' is often acquired, at least in part, through our adoption as kin by particular individuals. Herein lies the first marker of distinctive perspective: anthropologists develop a particular kind of expertise, one that is deeply shaped by the experience of living and working alongside *particular* people. What we come to know arises out of a conjunction of factors: the timing of our research, the people with whom we become acquainted, the events we observe and experience, and a wider sphere of influences – scholarly ideas, research questions, books read, the perspective of teachers, personal dispositions – that we bring with us to 'the field'. The first extensive fieldwork experience leaves an indelible mark on the constitution of the anthropologist. In this unprecedented training exercise we – usually youngish adults – are often called on to take up responsibilities we are yet to acquire in our own society, and find ourselves confronted with all manner of challenges in the way we conduct ourselves. We witness at close range the raw circumstances of the daily lives of our hosts and adoptive kin. It is not uncommon for anthropologists to find the first period of extended fieldwork a deeply transformative experience. Notwithstanding the constitutive force of our primary make-up, as a result of our immersion in a foreign social situation we learn to look at the world differently, and with a degree of empathy or fellow feeling for the people we have lived and worked with.

So, if the nature of ethnographic experience is so intimate, why have most anthropologists failed to bring to public attention the dire situation observed in many Aboriginal communities? Did we not see the forms of suffering now being detailed on a daily basis in the mainstream media? Did we 'normalise' it in our specifically culturally relativist way? Were we aware of suffering but consciously avoided writing about it?

At least a partial answer to these questions lies in the distinctive method I have described: the relationships we develop over time orient us, in most cases, in moral alignment with an obligation to the community of people among whom we work, rather than in a position from which criticism and negative judgment might easily follow. To do so may be regarded as an act of betrayal. Moreover, daily life is commonly inflected with humour, acts of imagination, expressions of public feeling that characterise the tenor of a community – where suffering and violence may be observed, anthropologists may also recognise that the people involved refuse to assent to their terms. These issues intersect with another. Long-term fieldwork confers a certain localism on its practitioners that is rarely reflected upon in the literature, but often evidenced in debates among anthropologists themselves. To put it simply, and notwithstanding notable exceptions, anthropologists who have worked in the same area across a similar period of time are likely to be attuned to a broadly shared outlook on the 'state of things' which in turn influences their attention to the wider field.

Localities across Indigenous Australia differ in multiple ways. The history of colonial conquest across Australia was uneven in the degree of its brutality, and inter-state variations in the institutional arrangements for governing Aboriginal people throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have left diverse legacies that carry through to the present.

Anthropologists observe and describe the specificity of social phenomena at a particular time and place. Hence the essays that follow reveal diverse perspectives on whether suffering is a reasonable and compelling concept to characterise the circumstances of particular places. However, a number of anthropologists are presently arguing that there is a dire situation that can be generalised from the particular circumstances of their experience to the broader context of remote Australia.

In her essay Marcia Langton characterises the crisis affecting Australianist anthropology in terms of 'the shock of the new'. The field of remote Indigenous Australia, she observes, has changed dramatically over the past three decades; the relatively solid ground of the self-determination era, conceptually buttressed in classicist anthropological writing and land claims reports by notions of cultural continuity and a focus on authority structures maintained by senior men, no longer exists. Most significantly for Langton, the demographic picture of Indigenous Australia has shifted radically over the past three decades; the majority of the population are now children, 38 per cent of the Indigenous population is under the age of fifteen, with a growth rate significantly higher than the non-Indigenous population. She reads Sutton's book to be the clarion call that establishes the transformed and devastated social landscape anthropologists have failed to describe and respond to. Langton observes that it is this 'shock of the new' that has undermined anthropological authority – we 'have become inured to the poverty and marginalisation of Aboriginal people, and accept these as normative and inevitable', saving our outrage for forms of state intervention geared towards cultural redevelopment.

If Langton's essay represents one pole in the current debates among anthropologists, Lattas and Morris's essay stands at the other. Lattas and Morris undertake an extended critique of Sutton's book, reading it as emblematic of an emergent field of conservative commentary in Australia that rationalises neoliberal forms of governmentality. More specifically, they accuse Sutton of bestowing anthropological authority to a governmental approach that seeks to deny its 'racist character under an ideology of practical care and exceptional necessity'. Lattas and Morris argue that Australian anthropology has failed to sufficiently explore its own involvement in the emergence of a new 'practical' approach in Indigenous affairs. Rather than liberation from an ideological stranglehold, they suggest the approach taken by Sutton misconstrues a newly intensified governmental application of surveillance and policing in Aboriginal affairs and more widely, such as we have witnessed under the terms of the Intervention. The ultimate aim of this neoliberal push is to remodel Aboriginal subjectivity, to instil new 'mainstream' values, to 'normalise' Aboriginal people by transforming them into wage labourers and rational consumers; to produce individuals well suited to the dominant logic of late modernity.

These two essays not only establish the poles of the argument among anthropologists, they also convey the depth of feeling and strong emotional tenor that has characterised much of the debate. Morris and Lattas are outraged at what they see as Sutton's pathologising of forms of cultural and political orientation that do not conform to neoliberal principles, and for lending anthropological authority to a newly authoritarian state program. Langton is angered by anthropologists' fixation on questions of state power at the expense of recognising that before them stand 'very sick children with an uncertain future'. Collectively with other contributions, these essays indicate how much is at stake in these debates – not simply the



authority of modes of social interpretation, but their deployment in establishing the parameters within which visions for the future might be imagined and life choices made.

## THE DEMISE OF MORAL AUTHORITY

From the 1970s Australianist anthropology drew much of its moral authority from the role it had to play in facilitating the legal transfer of land ownership to Aboriginal people. When the Fraser government passed the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (Northern Territory)* in 1976, anthropologists were at the forefront of mediating between Aboriginal claimants and the legal system. The institution of land rights has historically carried particular moral force, seen as it was to endow Aboriginal people with the 'recognition' that would allow them to move out of the settlements they had earlier been attracted to or forced onto as part of the state project to sedentarise and civilise nomadic people, to readopt aspects of their 'traditional' ways of life. In a sense land rights engaged anthropologists in the kind of work that might be undertaken in support of cultural difference. It was morally righteous work. Yet, as some have argued, it is also possible to view anthropologists' facilitation of land rights and more recently native title as enabling the work of the state: under this interpretation land rights is not simply about freeing Aboriginal people to pursue their own goals, but about forcing them to adopt a subjective position of 'traditional owner' with an associated set of unchanging cultural characteristics, a position codified in law with direct assistance of anthropological knowledge. Considered from this perspective, anthropologists who endorse the interventionist tendencies of recent governments might be seen as taking a stand that is broadly continuous with those who undertook the work of land claims in an earlier era. Recognition and intervention can be grasped as two faces of the same late liberal coin, as in Beth Povinelli's analysis. Some of the essays that follow indicate that Aboriginal people experience a sharper distinction between these governmental orientations. Here the significance of a shift in late liberal society, which Povinelli draws attention to in what she terms the 'arts of care', becomes particularly pertinent. This question of care – and how it might be understood and proffered in the present – is potently positioned at the heart of the debate.

While there may be considerable disagreement among anthropologists over how we might interpret the legacy of land rights, few would disagree with Langton's observation that since the land rights era we have lost the moral authority that characterised the discipline's standing in that earlier period. It is perhaps not surprising that the demise of this authority is followed by a decline in numbers of students wishing to pursue postgraduate research in Aboriginal Australia. It is no longer possible to take up research projects in remote areas that appear so clearly congruent with the practice of 'helping' the people with whom we work. Another line of disagreement emerges here, between those who regard critical interpretation as marking the limits of what anthropologists have to offer, and those who feel compelled to take other forms of action.

Perhaps the most radical proposition for anthropologists to consider in the present is posed by Sutton: the possibility that the very principle of cultural relativism, anthropology's founding disposition, is exhausted. Sutton argues that it is a commitment to the principle of cultural relativism that has dampened anthropologists' willingness to speak out about the forms of abuse and suffering they have witnessed first hand. But the prospect of rejecting cultural relativism has considerable implications: it puts anthropologists in a position not

simply to describe and analyse, but rather to stand in judgment of, the ways of life of the people with whom we live and work.

If these ideas have been a source of agitation around the edges of anthropological debate for some time, the declaration of a 'national emergency' Intervention in June 2007 brought them firmly to the fore. Anthropologists were initially reluctant to respond publicly for a variety of reasons, and conflicted in private discussions about the Intervention, but by the time Sutton's book was published two years later, the situation had changed. Critical responses to Sutton's book, initially by Jon Altman then more vigorously by Andrew Lattas, were followed by months of online debate; Australianist anthropologists were gripped by a set of issues with a level of intensity that had not been witnessed for years. While not all the key contributors to the online discussion are included in the pages of this book, the range of positions taken is well represented.

## CONCLUSION

The culture wars have coincided with a decisive shift in the way governments engage with academic knowledge. During the years of the Howard government we witnessed the death of the expert: scholarly opinion was to be sidelined by the view of the person in the street. This attack on 'elites' was a central plank of Howard's successful campaign to oust the Keating Labor government. It was an approach that the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, who oversaw the Intervention, deployed with great alacrity and enthusiasm. In pursuit of the perpetrators of child sexual abuse and paedophile rings, anonymous anecdote, the whispered voices of women, were invoked to provide the evidence upon which policy-making would turn in the wake of the declaration of a 'national emergency'. The Rudd government, while espousing a new commitment to 'evidence-based' policy-making, has carried on in the same vein. Perhaps this is another dimension of the 'shock of the new' confronting anthropologists. While historically only a handful of our forebears could be identified as having in any significant way influenced the direction of policy-making in Aboriginal affairs (most notably A.P. Elkin and W.E.H. Stanner), in the present we meet a new level of indifference regarding the value of our offerings, especially the critical understanding which we are best placed to contribute.

No matter which way we turn, in the early twenty-first century Australianist anthropology finds itself on unstable ground. If there is one certainty arising out of the culture wars it is that classicism is now thoroughly exhausted as a model for interpreting contemporary social worlds. Yet just as sure is the governmental need and public desire for an immediate replacement – a new model to coherently distil the circumstances of Aboriginal lives and establish the rationale and moral authority for clear ways of acting towards them. The most significant contribution anthropology can make to this process, as well as to the people with whom we work, is to highlight the dangers of replacing classicism with a model that would retain its substance in a new guise and continue to reinforce the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in terms of either unbridgeable difference or inevitable similarity.

As is revealed in the essays that follow, anthropologists have a distinctive ability to take hold of and analyse social situations in a rapidly changing world. Yet in the era of the media bite, with its deep constitutive influence on political process, we face an onerous challenge in

attempting to convey complex analysis to a wider public. In our hyper-mediated public sphere and against a backdrop of generalised anxiety and risk, it is increasingly common for attention to issues in Indigenous affairs to take the form of moral panics. Media and government will continue to select those grabs of anthropological opinion – along with all manner of other forms of commentary – that lend support to their agendas. The capacity for fine-grained anthropological analysis to cut through and influence public discourse will turn in part on the ability of anthropologists to find new ways to communicate the results of their research. Dialectically, it will rest upon the interest of the wider society to hear what anthropologists have to say. Ultimately it will rest upon a reconfiguration of the place of academic work in the public sphere itself.

## NOTES

- 1 For their thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this essay I am grateful to Jon Altman, Jeremy Beckett, Gillian Cowlshaw, Peg Job, Sarah Holcombe and Francesca Merlan.

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## Part I

# THE PROBLEM OF RECOGNITION

# Indigenous politics in late liberalism

Elizabeth A. Povinelli

## THE CRISIS OF CULTURE

‘The Crisis of Culture: Anthropology and the Politics of Engagement on Aboriginal Australia’ The title of the 2009 Australian Anthropological Society plenary initially made me back away from the invitation. In general, it is never a pretty scene when anthropologists are in a crisis about one of their flagship concepts. The cultural studies wars were bad enough. This crisis had all the earmarks of a bloodbath. I had heard rumours about acrimonious conversations on the Australia Anthropological Society email list. And from the snippets sent to me, ‘conversations’ was really the wrong word, hardly able to capture the vitriol furiously flying across postings. Personal and professional accusations were numerous, people charging each other with a variety of failures in the wake of the controversial intervention into Indigenous affairs in the Northern Territory. One of the accusations concerned the eerie silence among many in the discipline. Like protestors in 1968 France who asked in outrage ‘*A quoi sert Althusser?* Althusser – ‘*à rien*’, so in the midst of what appeared to be the most decisive change in Australian Indigenous policy since the emergence of Aboriginal land rights in the 1970s, many public figures asked, where are the anthropologists? After all they had had to say about Indigenous culture when times were good, had they nothing to say now? This eerie silence was shattered by the publication of Peter Sutton’s *Politics of Suffering*, a book in which Sutton reversed his longstanding support for a liberal settler consensus built around the recognition of traditional Indigenous culture.<sup>1</sup> The fuse on a hidden powder keg was lit. Hoist the barricades; from the first moment it was clear that this would be a rough, dirty debate. And like other revolutionary times, the Schmittian political worldview prevailed: are you my friend or enemy; are you for or against my side; on this or that side of the barricade; a liberal or neoliberal?

Few academics mind a brawl. They might pretend they do. But it can be good entertainment and, perhaps more importantly, it can produce passions that feel like real political engagement, like one is engaged in a political event that transcends mere academic concerns. With its rhetorical posturing, *The Politics of Suffering* was clearly written to provoke heated response and draw media attention. And it is hard not to take the bait. It’s hard to see Sutton’s sophomoric jab at childless academics lacking in sympathy for children as anything but bait. Poor Mother Teresa! But for the sake of full disclosure: I have been accused by Sutton, and others, of being a ‘postmodern anthropologist’, someone who refuses to distinguish between ‘traditional owners’ and ‘historical people’ and who is thus unqualified to adjudicate land and native title rights among competing Indigenous groups for lawyers and commissioners. And, though hardly a postmodern anthropologist, I agree with the political theorist Patchen Markell that as an institutional formation, cultural recognition primarily

shifts the tensions within liberalism onto the back of others.<sup>2</sup> But if I was never on the side of the so-called liberal settler consensus, I am certainly not on the side of the Intervention. And this is because I am hard pressed to see two sides. I see a reversal of terms; in the contemporary moment the attribution of being traditional is an accusation of criminal abuse rather than a possibility for the accumulation of legal and social rights. Culture was good. Now culture is bad. Culture is in crisis. How did culture become the go to or fall guy?

The trouble with getting anthropologists going about culture – or any discipline getting stuck into one of their key concepts – is that they sometimes forget the point. When we pause, we remember that what is at stake here is not culture but care, not the crisis of culture but the crisis in the arts of caring for others and especially the less fortunate. And if you are Indigenous in Australia it is statistically probable that your life is and will be very much worse than that of other Australians. I believe most Australians would like things to be better than they currently are for Indigenous Australians; more just, more equitable. And I believe that for the most part proponents and opponents of cultural recognition and social intervention honestly consider themselves to be trying to care for Indigenous Australians in such a way that this more just and equitable world might come into being. So if anthropologists care about *this* – the relationship between culture and the arts of caring for others – then what they might want to do is understand the relationship between these two practices – the practice of discriminating culture and the practice of caring for others. When we understand the relationship between these two practices then, perhaps, we can understand whether we are in the midst of a political event, what kind of event this might be, and thus what it might be to engage *politically* in Aboriginal Australia.

## THE ARTS OF CARE, LIBERALISM AND NEOLIBERALISM

So let us start with care. To care is not a socially divested action. To care is to make a claim, it is a small theoretical gesture. To care is to embody an argument about what a good life is and how such a good life comes into being. Thus the *arts* of caring for others always emerge from and are a reflection on broader historical material conditions and institutional arrangements. The point is not, therefore, to argue that someone really cares or doesn't really care – that Mal Brough really cared about Aboriginal children or that John Howard didn't really care or that neither of them cared and that both of them were simply engaged in a large grab or seeking a poll boost.<sup>3</sup> In the first instance, the question is what do we believe care to consist of such that when we experience a form of relating to one another socially, we experience that form of relating as a form of caring for others. So, we can begin by asking: what is it to care liberally or neoliberally and how did culture get involved in the mix?

First to what we mean by neoliberalism. The term neoliberalism, in works as diverse as those of Immanuel Wallerstein, David Harvey and Michel Foucault, marks the transformation of state and market relations between the postwar Bretton Woods agreement (loosely the Keynesian period) to its collapse in the 1970s, and marks two different philosophies about the proper relationship between markets, state, and civil society.<sup>4</sup> In general, Keynesians believed that because capitalism was subject to periodic unemployment crises, it should be regulated by state and international monetary and fiscal policy, one pillar of which was the redistributive compromise between state, corporation and labour. This formal compromise

came quite late in Australia with the 1983 Prices and Incomes Accord (colloquially known as The Accord) even as both the Hawke and Keating governments instituted key pillars of neoliberalism – privatisation of state corporations, floating the currency, and dropping trade barriers.<sup>5</sup> With the collapse of Bretton Woods, neoliberals argued for the privatisation and deregulation of state assets, the territorial dispersion of production through subcontracting, and a shift in tax policies so that they favoured the rich. Central to neoliberal thinking is the idea that the market naturally pays people what they are worth – and that bargaining power organised through extant institutional arrangements (the longstanding trade union bargaining agreement in Australia for instance) has nothing to do with proper income distribution. Indeed, so the argument goes, ‘intervening’ in bargaining distorts fair distribution based on the ultimate rationality of markets to pay people what they are worth. Australians would see this approach as behind the ending of the Accord in 1996 and the more recent WorkChoices program.

But neoliberalism is not merely a set of arrangements between the market, labour, and state, nor is it merely an older form of laissez-faire capitalism. As Foucault noted in his 1979 College de France lectures, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, the ascendance of neoliberals in Germany and the United States was not the resurgence of old forms of liberal economic ideology formulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. For Foucault the emergence of neoliberalism (or, what he called anarcho-capitalism in the US case) also transformed the ethical underpinnings of governance. Neoliberals do not merely argue that the market should be left alone. They argue that the market should be the general measure of all social activities and values. At the height of the recent financial collapse, economist Amartya Sen noted that even Adam Smith, the father of laissez-faire capitalism, did not believe that all social relations should be based on market principles.<sup>6</sup> In a recent *New York Review of Books* essay, historian Tony Judt asked how and why liberal democracies like the United States, Britain and Australia stopped assessing social programs and actions on the basis of political philosophy and instead restricted themselves to issues of profit and loss, and languages of efficiency, productivity and benefit to gross domestic product.<sup>7</sup> Whether one puts any faith in political philosophy as a neutral arbiter of social value, the fact remains that in neoliberalism the market has been liberated from the strict confines of the market and become the general measure of all policies of caring for *others*.

Once we understand that neoliberalism is not laissez-faire liberalism, not a social formation in which the state allows the market to proceed on its principles and the market allows the state to proceed on its principles, but something much more aggressive, then we can understand why we get nowhere arguing whether this or that person did or didn't care about Indigenous children or that this or that social welfare program was or was not a failure. Instead we need to start asking: what are the measures of failure, the arts of failure, such that people believe and experience cultural recognition and social welfare as failures? After all, failure is not a Kantian idea floating in a socially deracinated space any more than care or the traditional. It is instead a socially mediated way of assessing the social world. Why did welfare suddenly seem not to work? Here would be one answer: because within neoliberalism, any social investment that does not have a clear end – a projectable moment when input values (money, services, care) can be replaced by output value (workers compensated and supported by nothing except the market) – fails economically and morally.

And a social investment is an economic and moral failure whether or not the investment is life enhancing.

For instance, whatever we call the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme – work for the dole, dole top-up, community development scheme – the best statistics show that the program raised the personal income and employment of rural Indigenous men and women even after Howard cut back positions dramatically and increased reporting regimes. Assessing the relationship between employment, physical and mental health, and vague sets of life qualities is much harder, and not merely because it confronts an exceedingly difficult statistical task. Assessing the relationship between employment and other social indices is exceedingly difficult because one has to first agree what is a social ill or an instance of social care. This said, if the CDEP doesn't lead to so-called normal employment and normal employment is considered the ultimate social good because of how it helps the efficiency of the market and corporate profit, then the CDEP failed no matter that it preserved and enhanced local lives. In neoliberalism, to care for others is to refuse to preserve life if it lies outside a market value. Thus John Howard and Kevin Rudd can say that life will get much harder for Indigenous people but that this harm is a good.

### **LIBERALISM, NEOLIBERALISM, LATE LIBERALISM**

So where does culture fit in the struggles between laissez-faire and neoliberal forms of the market? How did anthropology get caught up to such an extent that academics are lobbing internet postings at one another, accusing each other of being neoliberals or refusing to understand that the liberal consensus was museum racism? To answer this question, we need to distinguish between laissez-faire liberalism and neoliberalism on the one hand, and something like postcolonial liberalism, or what I have called late liberalism, on the other. Late liberalism refers to the shape of liberalism as it responded to a series of attacks on it by anti-colonial and new social movements. That is, late liberalism is that aspect of liberalism which concerns social and cultural difference. It is the shape that liberal governance takes as it reacts to a set of legitimation crises over the meaning and ends of difference. This crisis is not independent of the ideological struggles between market and state relations as articulated by laissez-faire liberalism and neoliberalism, but neither is it purely and simply a projection of these struggles. From the 1950s onwards and culminating in violent student and worker protests in Paris and elsewhere in 1968, anti-colonial and new social movements transfigured the way liberalism governed difference by putting extreme pressure on its legitimating frameworks: western paternalist civilisationalism. Anti-colonial and new social movements refigured the arts of paternalistic, civilisational care into acts of colonial domination. Activists and their theorists claimed that western arts of caring for the colonised and subaltern were not rectifying human inequalities but creating and entrenching them. In short, these movements created a crisis of legitimacy for the governing. But this legitimacy crisis was, over time, turned into a crisis of culture for the governed as state after state instituted formal or informal policies of cultural recognition (or cognate policies such as multiculturalism) as a strategy for addressing the challenges of internal and external difference that they faced. The political theorist Wendy Brown has called this the culturalisation of politics.<sup>8</sup> In the wake of the liberal state's recognition of past harm, the crisis would no longer be a crisis of liberal legitimacy but a crisis of how to allow cultures a space within liberalism without rupturing it.



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