
In this balanced, convincing, and exhaustive book, Tim Rowse detects a long lasting ambiguity in approaches to indigenous issues and explores a contradiction that was never ultimately resolved. Is settler Australia dealing with indigenous peoples or populations? It makes a massive difference:

Whereas an Indigenous population would one day disappear, as its individuals and households assimilated into the wider society and were counted as part of the national population, an Indigenous people would remain a lasting interlocutor of and within the nation – with a distinct identity, heritage, institutions and land base (5).

John Howard’s notion of ‘practical reconciliation’, for example is the quintessential view of the populations approach. The peoplehood idiom, by contrast, ‘implies that social justice comes from a resolution of differences between political entities’ (7). In the end, Rowse concludes, ‘we have two modes of recognitions, two notions of social justice and two distinct perspectives in the politics of indigenous affairs’: social justice as parity and social justice as difference (7).

In a balanced critique of both these approaches, Rowse remains uncommitted; he is more interested in analysing a contradiction than in the prospect of resolving it. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on assimilation, governments’ preferred approach until the 1960s. Assimilation was necessarily premised on the understanding that indigenous individuals constituted an indigenous population: accomplished assimilation would have produced parity. Chapters 4 and 5 examine the ‘peoplehood’ paradigm, that progressively challenged the populations approach and had become institutional policy by the end of the 1960s. Chapters 6 and 7 are about the present: the former covers the recent development of indigenous organisations and the consolidation of an indigenous middle class in the context of a newly recognised collective political capacity; the latter constitutes a rejoinder to Helen Hughes’s influential critique of what she defines as the ‘Coombs experiment’. For Hughes, this model, fundamentally premised on the peoplehood approach, invariably produced detrimental results. Here Rowse is committed, as he pinpoints the weaknesses of Hughes’s argument and its internal inconsistencies.

Deeply held suspicion of indigenous self-determination, and fundamental misgivings about the very notion of indigenous collective political capacities, however, remain a powerful driver of current Aboriginal policies, including the ‘Intervention’ – the Northern Territory Emergency Response. On the basis of these shifts, from the populations to the peoplehood paradigm and back – that is, from assimilation to self-determination, and then from self-determination to its negation – in chapters 8, 9 and 10 Rowse proposes an interpretative history of Aboriginal self-determination. That phase, it seems, is now closed. Irrespective of what is to come next, the labour of historical analysis can begin.

As well as inviting an important debate in the context of a settler society where conflicting definitions of the very nature of reconciliation uneasily coexist, the unresolved binary Rowse dissects is important to understanding settler societies in general. On the one hand, as Rowse emphasises, facing these contradictions involves addressing the relationship between different and incompatible understandings of social justice in a settler colonial context. On the other hand, despite appearances, this should not be seen as a contradiction between what could be summarily described the ‘more’ and the ‘less’ settler colonial approaches. That both paradigms are entirely compatible with, indeed functional to, the operation of a settler colonial polity should be emphasised. Arguably, this unresolved tension
is typical, not exceptional, of settler societies. In the context of what I have elsewhere defined the settler colonial ‘situation’, these two approaches can be seen as representing different forms of indigenous ‘transfer’. They should be appraised together.

A ‘population’ is a statistical category; as such, it is denied cohesion or a collective political capacity. It is also inherently comparable, and it is this comparability that makes indigenous peoples disappear as indigenous. As they are defined by measurable socioeconomic characteristics, their indigeneity as a relational category that opposes them to the settler collective is redefined away. (Moreover, and significantly from a settler polity’s point of view, a statistical category does not have a land base.) Perhaps even more significantly for a settler polity, statistically defined indigeneity is subject to extinction. An indigenous population that is characterised by the same socioeconomic characteristics as the general population has ceased to be. But the ‘peoplehood’ approach presents other advantages, and having ‘domestic dependent nations’ and signing localised treaties with them is certainly not an untested proposition. The existence of indigenous ‘peoples’, on the one hand, allows for the recognition of a sovereign capacity that is simultaneously subsumed within the operation of the settler polity. On the other hand, this transfer enables processes of symbolic reconciliation that enhance the legitimacy of the settler state. Besides, settler recognition of an indigenous sovereign capacity keeps the spectre of an unsurrendered sovereign indigenous collective capacity at bay. The latter is radically beyond and against the settler sovereignty; the former is an integral part of it. Rather than drastically opposed, these two approaches should be seen as operating simultaneously in the context of a settler colonial articulation of transferist labour.

It is not by chance that these paradigms routinely coexist in dialectical tension. The periodisation Rowse outlines is historically accurate: there are detectably distinct, successive, ‘populations’ and ‘peoplehood’ conjunctures in the history of Australian Aboriginal policy. And yet, that ongoing competition between different ideas about the nature of the indigenous presences characterised each of these periods should be noted. The synchronic and selective application of these two paradigms should also be considered. Rowse shows that there is an urban Aboriginal population that is demanding to be recognised in the context of the ‘peoplehood’ paradigm, and that there are Aboriginal peoples in rural and remote Australia that are demanding to be treated in accordance with the ‘population’ paradigm (i.e., that the gap be closed). Neither demand is being satisfied. The settler polity is indeed expert in denying indigenous constituencies what they need/demand. It comes with practice. Besides, far from constituting the marker of a defective operation, the simultaneous and selective application of two contradicting principles constitutes an important marker of a settler sovereignty. Inconsistent? Bring it on; it’s the sovereign that decides on exceptions anyway.

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