"Genocide and Colonialism"

In conversation with Lorenzo Veracini, Ann Curthoys and John Docker discuss some of the issues at stake for Australian Aboriginal history in current international debates about the definitions of genocide.

Ann Curthoys and John Docker are the editors of Genocide? Australian Aboriginal History in International Perspective, a special issue of the journal Aboriginal History.

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Lorenzo: Thanks for agreeing to talk about the new issue of Aboriginal History. I would like to start this conversation by locating the issue against the backdrop of four different, albeit intertwined, contexts or scenarios: the global, the general, the local and the specific. In the first place, this relates to the recent stepping up in the coalescence of an international body of supranational jurisprudence or forensic discourse dealing with issues connected with genocide. It may be a mere coincidence but, despite US perplexity, the International Court for war crimes is being established at this time. It has been frequently noted - I'm thinking of Hardt and Negri's Empire, and there is a growing literature dedicated to the subject - that the discursive attention to genocide and related issues is crucial to the consolidation of a supranational system of governance.¹ In this light, how have you interpreted the debate in an Australian context?

John: For a few years I think we had been (and remain) haunted by Marcia Langton's anguished cry that any comparison with the Holocaust was being denied for the death, destruction and cruelty visited upon her people [Marcia Langton responds to Alexis Wright's Breaking Taboos in AHR]. More immediately, we were responding to the anxious or enraged response to the use of 'genocide' by the Bringing Them Home report, in relation to the stolen children, a usage the report quite understandably referred to the relevant clause in the 1948 UN Convention.² I'd also been reading and discussing recent American historiography with Ann, especially Peter Novick's The Holocaust in American Life and the impassioned passages where Native American and African American intellectuals and writers ask why there is a Holocaust museum in Washington to commemorate events that occurred in Europe. Why were specifically American genocides and terrible histories being occluded?³ I remember also discussing such things with Deborah Bird Rose and she kindly lent her copy of Ward Churchill's A Little Matter of Genocide.⁴ Churchill suggested that the 1948 UN convention significantly narrowed Lemkin's original 1944 definition. For our introduction to the Aboriginal History essays I went back to Lemkin's book Axis Rule in Occupied Europe and the chapter defining 'genocide'. I was struck by how supple and wide-ranging his formulations were, but also by the importance of his argument as a jurist – he'd been making it from the early 1930s – that there should be a continuing framework in international law for trying crimes against humanity and human rights.⁵ I began to relate an interest in international law to the Australian Liberal and, before it, Labor government's detention of refugees in what are concentration camps in the desert; to the rejection of the Tampa refugees; and to the actions of what I now saw as rogue states, like the United States and Israel, in defying their obligations under international law. And I certainly very much support the new international court!
Some of these concerns I evoked in a kind of Nietzschean-fragments essay, "Untimely Meditations", reflecting on the Tampa and '11 September'. Paradoxically, however, I would like scholarship on genocide to return to and renew itself at the source, as it were, with Lemkin's 1944 formulations as a springing-off point, rather than the UN Convention. I think theory and research shouldn't operate by legal definitions but by general theorising and conceptualisation, even while one recognises the legal importance of the UN Convention and the historical interest of its definition.

Ann: To the concerns John has outlined, I would add another two. As a specialist in Australian history, including Indigenous Australian History, I have been restive for some time about the narrow national framework within which we explore historiographical and historical issues. When the debates over the meaning of 'genocide' erupted in the year or two after the publication of the Bringing Them Home report, it struck me that much of the discussion revolved around different understandings of the word 'genocide', and that there was little reference to an international literature which might help us explore both the concept itself, and its applicability or otherwise to the Australian case. My other starting point was a growing interest in the relationship between history and law, partly as a result of supervising Ann Genovese's doctoral thesis, in which she explores the similarities and differences, in fact the dissonances and at times chasms in understanding, between history and law. The 'genocide' debate rested on both legal and historical knowledges, and part of the problem seemed to me to be that these two ways of seeing the world do not understand each other very well, though they think they do. I think, to be honest, I would have to say that my understanding of the issue of international governance came later, after we embarked on the project of editing a special issue of Aboriginal History on genocide.

Lorenzo: The second departure I want to focus on is the reaffirmation that Australia is a settler society and that the specificity of the Australian debate can't disregard this fact. In his article in the issue, Dirk Moses notes that the two narratives, settlement and genocide, "cannot be split off" [...] "the positive myth of origin is at once the negative one". This debate is likely to be perceived as endangering the very viability of the Australian polity. And this is perhaps why, even on the Left, scholars and historical work have been inclined to distinguish, select, compromise, and have generally been reluctant or late in acknowledging attempted genocide. On the other hand, as you have noted, the question of the relationship between genocide and settler colonialism was extensively debated after the publication of David Stannard's American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World, in 1992. Specifically, it was the legitimacy of the use of a holocaust terminology in a context that was not related to the history of the European Jewry that was perceived as controversial. However, ten years later, the widespread use of the 'H' word (and, even more so, the 'G' word) is an accomplished fact of the historiography on native America. I believe that this is not only a terminological point. Parallels with the Israeli debate can highlight a situation similar to the Australian one, a circumstance in which discussing explicitly or even recovering the historical record involves a perceived challenge to the viability of a settler ideology.

Could you comment on the Australian implications of this debate?

John: I think one premise of what we were doing, in thinking up a special series of essays on the question of genocide deploying comparative frameworks, was the productive general move in international theorising towards rejecting the uniqueness of the Holocaust thesis and instead to see the term 'genocide' as inclusive of many world-historical situations. At the same time we knew that any debate on genocide and its relation to Australian history had to involve the question of settler-colonialism, which we - in common with the interest in both 'diasporic' and 'transnational' readings - were seeing more and more in world-comparative terms. We also had a feeling that in Europe the debates on genocide did not generally acknowledge the relevance of the history of European colonialism to the Holocaust, or
acknowledge the interest of genocides that were not within or near Europe. This feeling was confirmed for us at the 'Generations of Genocide' conference organized by the Institute of Contemporary History and the Wiener Library, held at the University of London in January. The geopolitical focus didn't stray too far east or south of Europe, discussing, in particular, the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide (with Turkish academics there vigorously objecting to the use of the term!), and Rwanda. Where, one thought, has 'colonialism' gone? So we felt pleased that relating genocide to settler-colonialism was what our contributors were doing in *Aboriginal History*. I think another thing that pleased us was realizing that Lemkin was linking his definition of genocide to colonization in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, specifically Nazi colonization in Poland. That is a major reason why we see Lemkin's definition as so important: it explicitly links Nazi colonizing practices with the history of colonialism. There is a continuum there linking all parts of the world and justifying our and our contributors' interest in international perspectives.

**Ann:** One of my interests in this case is in pondering the emotional investments in coming to particular understandings of Australian history. I explored some aspects of this in an article called "Whose Home? Expulsion, Exodus, and Exile in White Australian Historical Mythology". There, I considered the deep desire, as I saw it, in non-Indigenous Australian culture to see ourselves as historical victims - of the land, of British imperial desires, of American power, of world wars. I argued that this desire for the status of victim made it extremely difficult for non-Indigenous Australians to recognise the history of their own country, and especially the physical, cultural, and economic violence that settlers perpetrated against Indigenous people. Thinking about the question of genocide, which I began to do seriously a year or two later, added another dimension to this concern. The simple replacement of the term 'extermination' (long used by Australian historians as part of the story of colonisation; most colonists believed it was inevitable, and saw signs of its possibility all around them) with the term 'genocide' changed the debate significantly. Where 'extermination' lies in the past, 'genocide' lives in the present. Genocide is something that has been attempted on a massive scale through the twentieth century, and has a legal status in the contemporary world. So, for me the debate has not been so much about the 'uniqueness' of the Holocaust, though I am aware of that debate, as about finding a way to understand Australian settlement history in a way that places it carefully within a larger history of colonisation and genocidal desire and practice.

**Lorenzo:** Despite the question mark in its title, this issue of *Aboriginal History* is actually very explicit. The relationship between the conscious and authoritative introduction of a 'genocide debate' and the 'return of the white Australia policy' - to use Bob Brown's expression - is likely to alienate part of the public as well as some of the historical opinion (I am thinking of Inga Clendinnen, for example). As noted by Colin Tatz in his analysis of Australian 'denialism', one of the recurring rhetorical devices deployed against the genocidal argument is the self-fulfilling notion that genocide is inapplicable to Australia because Australians were or are intrinsically alien to this sort of political determination. As a comparative historiographer, I want to draw attention to a debate that presents some notable similarities, to highlight the risks involved in relying on a strategy of the reaffirmation of historical practice and protocol. The Italian historical debate on Fascist atrocities in Africa and during WWII has also witnessed a widespread use of this denialist argument. According to this narrative, 'Italians' are good people by definition - 'italiani brava gente' - unlike 'the Germans', who are capable of anything. 'Italians' just could not have committed genocidal crimes. This argument is typically followed by another statement that completes the circle: 'Italians' did not commit genocidal acts because they were or are intrinsically alien to a culture that would allow those acts. Needless to say, the Left has comprehensively lost this debate, and - despite historical 'proof' and extensive research on Fascist use of chemical bombing, concentration camps, deliberate starvation of entire populations as a counter
insurgency strategy, and a network of concentration camps including an extermination camp located near Trieste for Italy's Jews - a denialist array of opinion has managed to neutralise the consequences of this historical scholarship. In this case, reaffirming the inner rationality and morality of historical writing as a scholarly enterprise did not then influence public opinion. The timing of the stepping up represented by this issue of *Aboriginal History* in the context of the current political climate in Australia is quite challenging. What kind of reaction are you expecting?

**Ann:** I'm not expecting a strong public reaction, because of the scholarly nature of the essays in the collection. The essays are conceptually sophisticated, careful to make distinctions, do not make simplistic equations between the Holocaust and Australian history, and generally, in my view, take the debate to a higher level than it has so far seen in Australia. Public debates generally want more simplistic views than this special issue offers. On the other hand, I am looking forward to some lively debate amongst historians and other scholars interested in Australian history and its place in world history. After all, many have expressed wariness of using the term 'genocide' in relation to Australian history, and I do not expect our journal to dispel all doubts. My overall view is that historians' work does enter into and influence public debate and understanding, but not overnight, and not without the emergence of appropriate cultural and political contexts for taking their work seriously.

**John:** I think there is a movement – completely unplanned! – within the introduction, which goes from tentative suggestion to affirming the importance of linking genocide with European settler-colonies since 1492. We are certainly aware that a focus on genocide endangers a myth of origins, of white Australians as innocent, and innocents, in history. We had both been working on exploring, in a 'postsecularist' way, the historical importance of biblical stories like Exodus for European and Western settler-colonial history. That is, particularly as they are evoked in Edward Said's wonderful essay "Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution*: a Canaanite reading", and as discussed in Regina Schwartz's *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. Said points out that the Canaanites were already in the Promised Land; Schwartz suggests that in Exodus there is a victimological narrative, that previous persecution, bondage and suffering is held to justify later violence, destruction, and trauma inflicted on others, even those like the Canaanites who had nothing to do with the original bondage and persecution. Seeing oneself as a victim – look at the United States since '11 September! And Americans already have the Exodus story as their foundational Puritan myth, as Said points out – permits one to be innocent in history, to be comfortable with denial, to be outraged at the accusation of complicity in founding violence.

I do have certain passions here. I am bemused by and, dare I say, rather disdainful of those scholars like Inga Clendinnen who wish to close down the debate in deference to the tender sensibilities of 'public opinion'. I don't wish to be Panglossian about history, like the denialists, and I wish to widen the questioning of the foundations of white Australian history by rejecting narrow definitions of genocide as mass murder or direct killing. Rather, I want to insist on the importance of the wide-ranging Lemkinian definition (that of course includes direct killing), which I feel would mean that settler-colonialism at its very conception involved a series of concerted actions to destroy the foundations of life of the oppressed group (the colonized) while attempting to replace them with the national pattern of the colonizers. By the way, I think something we might call 'Empire denialism' is at work in these discussions. One talks of 'white Australian history', but of course it was the British who colonized Australia and all over the world. Yet the British now go on as if they never had or founded colonies. This was apparent at the London 'Generations of Genocide' conference: generations did not seem to include generations of genocidal colonizers from Britain.

Do I think we can influence 'public opinion' in Australia? No, I don't. I just hope that this issue, in providing exciting and challenging comparative interpretations, can influence the debate among scholars, and that we can connect up with international scholarship attempting to theorize and research the history of genocide in innovative ways. On the other hand, I
recognise the importance of what Dirk Moses has argued about 'perpetrator trauma': that the post-war German public sphere did confront and openly discuss the horror committed in their name, which is something, he points out, that has not occurred in Australia. In relation to 'perpetrator trauma', it interests me that Freud in *Moses and Monotheism* argues that humanity developed its morality by 'perpetrator trauma'. Just as the sons finally confronted the implications of their murder of the father, the Israelites (so Freud eccentrically argues), having murdered Moses, the Akhenatian prophet who had come to lead them, later felt guilt and rethought their consciousness and ethics and then refashioned their God and his morality in Moses' image.17

**Lorenzo:** Finally, I would like to talk about the position of this issue of *Aboriginal History* in the dynamic context of Aboriginal history as an academic discipline. I believe this volume can be seen as a cornerstone in its evolution, at least as important as the first issue, the one opened by W. E. H. Stanner.18 I'll try to illustrate this point in the most synthetic way possible. Please note that this framework is not rigid and mainly serves the purpose of establishing a few interpretative signposts. My reading of the evolution of Aboriginal historiography entails four succeeding but dialectical waves. The first wave (1960s-1970s) proposed a dialectical opposition between Aboriginal absence and Aboriginal presence (I'm thinking of Rowley's work) and was concluded by the unequivocal recording of Aboriginal destruction and survival - a solution that dialectically synthesised the first dichotomy.19 The second wave (1970s-1980s), directly following the first one, proposed Aboriginal passivity and Aboriginal challenge in struggle with each other. (Examples of this could be Blainey's *Triumph of the Nomads* and, at the other end of the spectrum, Reynold's *The Other Side of the Frontier*). This was superseded by Aboriginal resistance (and history) fully establishing itself as a recognized interpretative category.20 Thus, the third phase (1980s-1990s) has represented Aboriginal strategies of confrontation and collaboration in tension with each other and was concluded by the reaffirmation of both in Aboriginal agency. Ann McGrath's *Contested Ground* epitomises this phase - again a synthesis of two opposing conceptions.21 The fourth wave (1990s-) is still unfinished and deals, logically, with the legacy of the previous phases. Once Aboriginal autonomy was fully recognized as an interpretative and historiographical notion, the dialectical opposition shifted and was replaced by the tension between unsurrendered sovereignty and its extinguishment. The explicit appraisal of an Australian genocide or, - better said - of an Australian attempted genocide, is concluding this historiographical phase and entails a synthesis of both, allowing for the assessment of both genocidal practices and irreparable loss of autonomy. This issue of *Aboriginal History* seems to be aptly representing the historiographical moment. It constitutes a collective statement that, seen in this light, has been decades in the making.

**Ann:** Well, what a wonderful question! I'm not sure if I would make such large claims for this issue of *Aboriginal History*, though of course am rather pleased that you do. I like your outlining of four phases, and four contradictions – absence/presence, passivity/challenge, collaboration/confrontation, and extinguished/continuing sovereignty – and cannot claim to have quite thought this through so clearly. I think confronting the question of genocide in some ways returns us to a full recognition of the murderous desires that underlie colonisation, the taking of someone else's land. It may not have been genocidal to decide on a penal settlement at Botany Bay; there was at that point still a hope that the settlers and the Indigenous peoples could live in peace and harmony. But the same cannot be said of the decision to continue with settlement. Once it was known that Indigenous people lived in the interior, wanted the settlers to leave, and died in great numbers wherever the settlers went to such an extent that their survival seemed unlikely, then the decision to continue the colonising process has a genocidal component to it. In continuing the colonising project the British government, and the British and local-born settlers in the Australian colonies, knew what they were doing. Everyone knew that their presence meant death and destruction for
the original occupiers of the land. Putting all this in the context of world history, of British
imperial and colonising history, and of genocidal desires and practices throughout history,
helps us see ourselves as part of a broader tragedy in human history. As a people, the
colonisers of Australia and contemporary non-Indigenous Australians are no worse, and no
better, than perpetrators elsewhere. We can accept that appalling things happened here,
without losing a sense that a different future is possible.

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Notes


Into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, Sydney:


4 W. Churchill, A Little Matter of Genocide, Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present, San


7 A. D. Moses, "Coming to Terms with Genocidal Pasts in a Comparative Perspective", Aboriginal History, 25,
2001, p. 104.

8 D. Stannard, American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World, New York: Oxford University Press,
1993.

9 See L. Veracini, "The Evolution of Historical redescription in Israel and Australia, and the question of the

10 http://www.wienerlibrary.co.uk/

11 R. Lemkin, Axis Rule in Occupied Europe, op. cit.


15 See, among others, the excellent work by C. Pavone, Una Guerra civile: saggio storico sulla moralità nella


In Australian Humanities Review, see also

- the Indigenous Issues and Race & Ethnicities archives

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