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REVIEW ARTICLE

**Australia's Enlightened Paradox: European Universalism
and the Case for Cultural Difference**

Baden Offord, Erika Kerruish, Rob Garbutt, Adele Wessell and Kirsten Pavlovic, *Inside Australian Culture. Legacies of Enlightenment Values*, with a Foreword by Ashis Nandy and an Afterword by Vinay Lay, London & New York: Anthem, 2014.

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Inside Australian Culture. Legacies of Enlightenment Values is a cultural critique of contemporary Australia's state of decolonisation from a mixed insider-outsider perspective which embeds Australian scholarship within Indo-Asian 'Southern Theory'. It lays out an analytical framework that allows us to understand how Europe's Enlightenment heritage informs and perpetuates a racial status quo which has not substantially altered in the more than 200 years of white settlement of the continent and backs this perception up with three case studies centring on power asymmetries and ethnic belonging; the NSW bill to regulate Chinese immigration (1858), the Cubillo v. the Commonwealth case (2000), and the Cronulla Riot (2005). Whereas these case studies may appear far removed from each other in time, theme and relevance, they go across the ethnic board and so exemplify Enlightenment thought as it perseveres in the public arena and informs and confirms race relations premised on the European norm, privilege and superiority. By writing back from the inside but contextualising their analysis within a non-European framework of thinking, the authors achieve the critical leverage necessary to lay bare and deconstruct the cultural locatedness and limitations of European universalism.

Published within the Anthem Australian Humanities Research Series, *Inside Australian Culture. Legacies of Enlightenment Values* is a cultural critique of contemporary Australia's state of decolonization

and, as such, an admirable case of 'thinking out of the box'. It was written in a communal effort by a small team of humanities scholars at Southern Cross University NSW—Rob Garbutt, Erika Kerruish, Kirsten Pavlovic and Adele Wessell—who were coordinated by the Cultural Studies scholar Baden Offord. In a commendable non-hierarchical move, chapters are not individually signed and all five researchers take equal credit for the final book content, which has been effectively made coherent and cohesive in choice of vocabulary, style, syntax and format. Their concise study, while of modest format but therefore perhaps more effective, is a particularly lucid account of the ways Europe's Enlightenment heritage keeps informing the current lack of power checks and balances in the Australian nation—a nation that pretends to the Enlightened ideals of universal equality, democracy and progress for its citizens but subscribes to a biased negotiation of Australianness.

The critical framework Offord's group develops and the three case studies they carry out make plausible the hypothesis that Enlightenment thought is so firmly embedded that it reproduces and perpetuates itself within the structures of Australian society and culture; indeed, it limits the very parameters that should make accessible to all Australians Enlightenment's much-vaunted achievements of universal freedom, tolerance, democracy, justice, education, healthcare and material progress on the basis of equity. Yet, the very presupposition of such equity—the proverbial Australian fair go—ignores and glosses over the inequity that informs social structures on the basis of race, class and gender differences. As in/justice is only understood within European Enlightenment terms by the mainstream and is not open to cultural difference, Australians of non-European descent, be they Indigenous or immigrants, have remained disenfranchised as the country developed from a late 18th c. British penal settlement into an Anglo-Celtic state formally independent from the 'Motherland' at the start of the 20th c., to become today what is officially and proudly marketed as a multicultural society after the influx of non-European immigrants in the 20th and 21st centuries. As the authors show, despite multiculturalism, a rethinking of the relationship between the state and the individual citizen across cultural difference is imperative if Australia is to attain veritable postcolonial status.

In short, the authors describe Australia as a multicultural settler nation stuck in its British Enlightenment ways. A post-colonial nation that boasts a vast, imported Anglo-Celtic population which still outnumbers the original Indigenous inhabitants and recently-arrived non-Anglo-Celtic immigrant groups, it is geared up for 'Whiteness' to make the dominant claim on what is considered and marketed as 'national culture'. The team's analysis shows that while Australian society may be politically post-colonial since 1901 (hyphen intended)—although the British Queen's status of Head of State belies this—it cannot be deemed culturally independent or postcolonial [absence of hyphen intended] from the West at present. Their apt combination of theoretical analysis and case study supports Aboriginal scholar Aileen

Moreton-Robinson's claim that large parts of Australia's cultural space are still 'postcolonising' (2003, p. 37), that is, in the process of decolonisation. As the authors put it:

What we argue is that Australia is an unfinished project characterised by Enlightenment values that have become instrumental of pathologies of power. Contemporary Australian values have been and continue to be sustained through a matrix of power relations that were established through the installation of Enlightenment. Values that underpin national discourse have become pathologies in the way they have been invoked and applied through the dominant template: the rationalisation of tolerance, justice and equality for all, for example—as bedrock Australian values—has frequently produced its very antithesis. (p. 33)

The epistemological niching of the Australian nation as an exponent of occidental culture aligns Australia with other ex-colonies such as New Zealand, South Africa, Canada and the USA, all British products of Europe's Imperial expansion in previous centuries which in the case of Britain found its moral justification in a 'pragmatic, utilitarian and instrumentalist' variant of the Enlightenment concern with individualism, progress, civilisation and modernity as conceived by the West (pp. 30-34). Offord et al draw attention to the specific embedding of Enlightenment values within Australian society as it was founded as a British penal colony on the Asian outskirts of Empire; perceived as an outlandish, alienating inhospitable continent; yet also conceived of as a blank, virgin space available for White occupation. As they write, 'Enlightenment thought took shape in relationship to the traditions present in the colony, despite the difficulty much Enlightenment thought had in acknowledging other traditions as a condition of understanding and as valuable in their own right' (p. 15). Most notably, this affected the Indigenous peoples, who have suffered the dire consequences of their cultural difference, their Otherness until the present. As a settler nation, Australia has had to deal with a particular array of class, gender and race issues over more than two centuries of European occupation of the continent. The authors address all three categories of analysis but are concerned foremost with *Australian* identity and so with race/ethnicity, focusing on Aboriginal first ownership of the land and Terra Nullius, the White Australia Policy and non-Anglo immigration, policies of Indigenous absorption, assimilation and self-determination, and the complexities of multiculturalism. Their case studies, which analyse the NSW bill to regulate Chinese immigration of 1858, the *Cubillo v. the Commonwealth* case of 2000, and the Cronulla Riot of 2005, may at first appear far removed from each other in time, theme and relevance but draw together different facets of Enlightenment thought as it perseveres in the public arena and informs and confirms race relations premised on the European norm, privilege and superiority. In doing so, subtle links are established between the theoretical and practical level of their analysis which exemplify the need to step outside the Enlightenment framework in order to understand how it informs the perseverance of racial issues throughout time and place,

be it with Indigenous Australians or non-Anglo-Celtic immigrant groups.

The authors' analysis of the NSW bill 'An Act to Regulate Chinese Immigration' of 1858 is particularly incisive in connecting race and gender as mutually reinforcing categories of oppression. The Chinese had turned into a steady but unwelcome ethnic presence on the waves of the goldrushes of the 1850s. Although they were ostensibly frugal, hard-working and non-conflictive family and community builders, as a 'culture so ancient and different from the British, so capable of maintaining difference in the face of poverty, hardship and negotiations for the necessities of life' they were deemed a threat (p. 51) that could contaminate the health and purity of the nation, precisely because they performed so well on a number of 'civilized' fronts and could so endanger the myth of British superiority. Although the racial anxiety their presence generated, leading to the qualification of a 'weak, effeminate and inferior' race (p. 53), was not strong enough to pass the Bill, 'this was not before it had led to established categories, narratives, terms and hierarchical structures that persisted in debates about the legitimacy of non-Anglo Australian citizens', which would lead to their cultural discreditation and exclusion (p. 61). The White Australia policy that informed White vs. outside (Asian) and inside (Indigenous) racial relations for three quarters of a century was only a small step away.

The Cubillo v. The Commonwealth case of 2000 puts the legal consequences of the 1997 Bringing Them Home Report to the test, which revealed a shameful past of institutionalized child-abduction from Aboriginal families. The Stolen Generations policy had been inspired by an Enlightenment philosophy of human progress that claimed a superior stage for European civilisation into which inferior races could and should be assimilated by training and education. The authors analyse the unsuccessfulness of the claims for compensation pursued by the mixed-descent NT Aborigines Lorna Cubillo and Peter Gunner against the state for perceived institutional violence as the product of a Western legal and historical framework of verifiable, objective truth that is unable to recognize cultural difference and so to value evidence within its own epistemological parameters. The court was unable to recognize the harmful mechanisms that informed the personal grief and trauma that was inflicted; it applied an interpretative framework that foregrounded the removal policy as benign and responsible within a superseded social context of paternalistic welfare, thus deracialising its content and intention (p. 72). As Offord et al conclude, 'While the objectivity of history has been challenged, litigation has provided an alternative forum for privileging and legitimising a single colonial account of history' (p. 78).

The Cronulla Riot (2005) brings us back to non-Anglo-Australian immigration and its detractors in a paradigmatic setting of mainstream public life: the beach. As the authors point out, in such settings the claims on Australianness as Whiteness find their most fervent

supporters, and the public arena—in theory open to all—is most intensely inscribed with notions of White ownership. The media offered contrasting reactions to the White mobbing of men of Muslim and Middle-Eastern appearance in the beachside Sydney suburb of Cronulla, speaking of ‘Our racist shame’ as well as denying the riot’s ‘racial undertones’ (p. 79). Yet, due to its setting on the margins of the continent the Cronulla Riot played a role in a resurgent ‘policing [of] Australian citizenship’ as Suvendrini Perera asserts (p. 82, *cited*), and, located near the site where Captain James Cook first landed, Aileen Moreton-Robinson considers the Cronulla riot ‘inextricably [connected] with white possession of Australia’ (p. 82, *paraphrased*). In being directed against men, racism against the rising numbers of Lebanese beach dwellers in Cronulla also acquired a gendered twist, which, again, shows the easy overlap of discrete analytical categories in discourses of dis/empowerment. The authors conclude that, ‘Ownership of Australian identity by the ‘locals’ of the nation encloses identity for their exclusive enjoyment and allows them to act as proprietorial gatekeepers’ (p. 92).

The authors’ strategy is to write from *within* as well as from *without* an Australian cultural framework that is capable of being critical within itself and unpacking the very set of Enlightenment values that inform the Anglo-Celtic mainstream; therefore they resort to Southern Theory, a postcolonial stream of thought developed outside Western academia which ‘does not claim universality for a metropolitan point of view, does not read from only one direction, does not exclude the experience and social thought of most humanity, and is not constructed on terra nullius’ (Raywin Connell quoted p. 5). They take particular inspiration in the work done by the late Vince D’Cruz, an Australian Cultural Studies scholar of Malayan-Indian descent; and by the Indian sociopolitical theorist, psychologist and contemporary cultural critic Ashis Nandy. Whereas D’Cruz concept of resilient minority or ‘little’ cultures sparked off the team’s research initiative, Nandy’s thought provides the deeper theoretical framework for the study. This is evident from the foreword he provided to the book and the pertinent quotes from an interview that introduce each chapter, thus inspiring, guiding and framing subsequent content. The Indian southern theorist, postcolonial critic and UCLA historian Vinay Lal closes off with an afterword which reflects on Australia’s current state of identity as regards interculturality. The book’s intellectual point of departure is perhaps most neatly summed up in one of Nandi’s quotes:

The Enlightenment vision also is a very, over the last two-and-a-half centuries, totalising posture because it thinks it is the last word in human history. It’s as if Europe in the eighteenth century found the final answers to certain kinds of specific problems of human public life—and all that we can do now is to make minor editorial changes. (p. 15)

The group’s study shows that the necessary critical engagement and leverage to subvert this vision is available on Australian ground. The

authors give an historical and theoretical overview of Enlightenment thought within British colonialism in Australia and how it has perpetuated itself into the present in the first section of their book, then dedicate a section to three case studies and round off with a concluding section that summarises the connections between the theoretical framework and its practical applications, advocating a new sharing of public culture across different cultural traditions within the nation space:

To accept the idea that communal traditions have no role in negotiating the standards and practices of public life is to accept the view that cultures and their traditions are only a stop on the road to an already established form of modernity—a modernity in which the individual exists in an unmediated relationship with the state and its institutions. But if, as D’Cruz observes of his own experience, the negotiation of a secure place of belonging arises not out of the rejection of ‘little’ cultures’ but from within them, then diverse cultural traditions should not be written out of the nation. Or perhaps, more accurately, they cannot be written out because, in Nandy’s words, “cultures are refusing to sing their swansongs and bow out of the world stage to enter the textbooks of history. Indeed, cultures have now begun to return, like Freud’s unconscious, to haunt the modern system of nation states”. We think this return can be welcomed. (p. 113)

The novelty of Offord, Garbutt, Kerruish, Pavlovic and Wessell’s approach is comparable to the new insights provided by the likes of Martin Nakata, who advocates the local complexities of the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal Cultural Interface (2007); and Alison Ravenscroft, whose latest work is a firm critique of mainstream blindness to cultural difference (2012). The authors have written a particularly inspired and incisive account of the European conceptual legacy as it keeps informing Australian society as the unmarked norm which precisely stands in the way of realizing the Enlightened values and achievements this legacy claims for its citizens.

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