

The More Things Change . . . The Origins and Impact of Australian Indigenous Exclusion

Rae Norris

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There has been a considerable gap in Australian literature for a long time that explains in relative simple terms why Aboriginal Australians have been isolated from wealth creation and involvement within simple economic practices such as employment for anything other than slave wages. Rae Norris has provided us with a text that enables non-Indigenous and international readers an insight into the colonial mismanagement of Australia's greatest resource: the original inhabitants. Indeed, I personally liked Norris's descriptive accounts about how when the colony experienced severe labour shortages, there was widespread refusal by the settler society to employ the Aboriginal. For example: 'The use of Aboriginal labour in any substantial way, at least for wages, was clearly still not on the agenda' (p. 34).

Within modernity, many non-Indigenous Australians do not realise, or fail to accept, the concepts that in real terms Aboriginal people did not become a part of the Australian working economy until the Whitlam years in the early 1970s. In many Australian states we could not own property; if we were employed, it was usually on a lower pay structure (if we were paid in cash at all). Many people were paid for labour in grog or overinflated prices in other commodities. As a graphic illustration, a close friend of the author's father laboured 10-hour days for a week on Stradbroke Island in 1950, to be paid with only a large bottle of rum and a bag of flour. Even in the mid-20th century, Aboriginal labour was held in contempt. To illustrate this, as recently as 1972 the *Queensland Aborigines Act* was passed, with legal restrictions for Aboriginal people living on reserves, ensuring Aboriginal cultural customs were banned; and reading matter, mail, recreation, and marital and sexual relationships were censored by law; and any work and wage worth could be (and invariably was) decreased; and Aboriginal movements recorded (*Aborigines Act 1971*, No. 59). A shortfall in the book is the fact that Norris fails to mention this and similar draconian legislation between 1967 and 2007 'which ignores massive social, political, demographic, economic and legislative changes' (Hollingsworth, 2011, p. 49). There is an important time period which Norris skips over. Rather the text almost appears as though it has been cut short by an editor; or, like many great works its going over the word count — and zip, the reader jumps from 1967 to the 2007 Northern Territory intervention. To her credit, she highlights the ap-

palling lack of consultation and successive governments' blind eye to the recognition of Aboriginal human rights, both by the former Howard government and the almost rubber stamp given by the subsequent Rudd–Gillard governments. We are the only country in the Western world to have its own army invade itself; and interestingly, both Russia and China accept private housing as a human right. Only the governments of North Korea and Australia deny the right to a private home on Indigenous lands (Hughes & Hughes, 2012). Norris's explanation of the Northern Territory Intervention, or NTER, and its damage to Aboriginal people their communities and relations with government, is clearly given on pages 161 to 171 and should be mandatory reading for all Australians.

Allowing for the 40-year jump in history, the text is well balanced across nine chapters. Norris, like many commentators, however, uses the word 'the Dreaming' on pages 19, 22, 23 and others. This is a white man's term coined by Frank Gillen, a postmaster in Alice Springs in 1896–1897 (Mulvaney, Morphy, & Petch, 1997). This and Norris's heavy reliance on the 1988 text of Dingle reduced the impact of Chapter 2; however, the early chapters provide a sound foundation on the political, economic and intellectual forces that governed the early occupation and first major invasion by the British, who, unlike their other colonisation projects in other countries, failed to have any respect or regard for Australia's Aboriginal inhabitants. The core moralistic convention that Norris illustrates is that Aboriginal people in general received no equitable place within the societal structure and establishment of the Australian economy for over 200 years. This denied Aboriginal people the ability to accumulate financial, social or human capital.

Chapter 4 illustrates the arrogance with which colonisers worldwide exploited indigenous peoples to ensure their untrained, unskilled place in the strata of society gave them no opportunity to display or gain human or social capital whereby they could develop into a skilled worker (see pp. 56–7, 63–64.) Norris correctly notes this as the baggage of the British.

Chapter 5 goes over well-trodden ground, covering the conflict of two opposed cultures; and Chapter 6 looks at the Victorian situation in detail, highlighting the fiasco

that was Coranderrk, a successful mission destroyed by mismanagement by the very organisation set up for Aboriginal welfare, the Aboriginal Protection Board. Chapter 7 covers Queensland and Northern Territory legislation and the impact of wages being paid into trusts. Yet Norris fails to outline the long battles to recover stolen wages, nor does she detail the economic and complex social concepts in the destruction of social capital following child removal practices and its economic impact on Aboriginal society. Chapters 8 and 9 are, as previously stated, well written.

Overall, a sound text. However, I stress it fills only a part of the void in explaining Aboriginal Australians' lack of involvement in the modern economy, illustrating how the current problems of health, education, unemployment, incarceration, housing, lack of family wealth — indeed, low human, social and financial capital levels — are the result of two centuries of arrogance in not paying Aboriginal people for their labour. Norris illustrates simply the shortcomings within the Northern Territory intervention, re-establishing the gap between Aboriginal

and non-Aboriginal Australia. Would I recommend Norris's text for the school, personal or university library? Yes, definitely, it should be mandatory reading for all those interested in Australian society.

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