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Section B: Review

Waking Up to Dreamtime: The Illusion of Aboriginal Self-Determination

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Waking up to Dreamtime contributes to a currently popular Australian genre of policy commentary that is skeptical about claims articulated through Aboriginality, particularly those around Aboriginal self-determination. To the extent that this is clearly an important issue for many Australians, Gary Johns and other contributors to *Waking Up* pose a challenge to many Aboriginal people, to well-meaning leftist commentators, educators, and their sympathetic white Australian supporters. However, with one or two notable exceptions, the book does not address the issues in a way that is respectful of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and people, or attuned to the complexities involved. Moreover, many of the chapters are not sufficiently reflexive about the role of 'Westernity' – the counterpart to Aboriginality. This severely undermines the claims the authors attempt to make but will, unfortunately, likely make the book appealing to those who are seeking simple answers to current fears and controversies.

The title of the volume, particularly the trivialisation of Aboriginal Dreaming and the dismissal of aspirations for self-determination, indicates a lack of respect for Indigenous culture and peoples. This sets the tone for some of the contributions. However, as with many edited collections, the contributions vary and there are some thoughtful and useful chapters here too. All the contributions have an Australian focus, except for the first

chapter by Tom Flanagan, which overviews the Canadian situation.

Flanagan's piece, 'Aboriginal Orthodoxy in Canada', pp. 1-19, is one of the least satisfactory pieces in the collection. He opens with a recitation of the costs of Indigenous programs. However, without benchmarks or reference points for public sector funding on the sorts of programs that he mentions, the figures are meaningless. More seriously problematic are statements such as 'the aboriginal inhabitants of Canada were ... several thousand years behind the civilizations of Europe, Asia, Mexico, or Peru' (p. 4). Flanagan's supporting evidence is that these peoples did not have a state, calendars, mathematics, and so on (p. 4). Here Flanagan neglects that the twentieth century has seen events that make most of us rather more circumspect about such prescriptive understandings of civilisation and the civilising potential of the state. Moreover, such comments undermine the possibilities for serious dialogue between Indigenous and newcomer peoples. Complementing Flanagan's devaluation of Indigenous traditions are his patronising prescriptions about the hallmarks of Western civilization such as individualism and the market (see p. 18). For instance, in discussing the pursuit of Aboriginal claims through the courts, he says this process 'may transfer some money to some aboriginal people, but it also encourages them to see the problems in their own lives as the result of actions of others rather than as challenges for them to overcome by their own initiative' (p. 14).

The subsequent chapter, Gary Johns' 'The Poverty of Aboriginal Self-Determination', p.

20-45, continues similar themes. Johns argues that self-determination produces an artificial Aboriginal political infrastructure (p. 21) – artificial because ‘there are forces affecting indigenous people far more powerful than any aspirations their leaders may express’ (p. 21). These forces relate to Indigenous people’s involvement with the modern world, which, for Johns, disqualifies Aboriginality or Indigeneity. This point is indicative of a series of simplistic mutual exclusions which Johns uses in his chapter: to be Aboriginal is not to be modern (p. 23); ‘self-determination ... can only be guaranteed by the state from which self-determination is sought’ (p. 22); and equality and separateness cannot be maintained in the nation-state (p. 24). In addition to being profoundly disrespectful (for example by denying Indigenous people a contemporary existence), Johns’ argument does not reflect the empirical complexity of self-determination claims. In this sense, Johns manufactures the separatism which he targets. Other recurrent themes are the summary dismissal of Indigenous practices and social organisation – for example, the ‘small scale of Aboriginal organisation is inimicable to fair decision-making’ (pp. 33-34) and the implicit assumption of the neutral and ahistoric nature of the Western state and liberalism. For instance, on the tension between cultural and economic survival, he states that this is ‘only apparent when a choice between the two is made available. If the state is not willing to support their economic survival then their choices will become far more urgent, the tension will be resolved’ (pp. 38-39). This formulation entirely eschews the fact of colonialism and installs its primary driver, the state, as the basis for a solution.

Trevor Satour’s ‘The New Authoritarian Separatism’ (pp. 46-75) ranges across Aboriginal politics, engaging issues in a more complex way than either Flanagan or Johns. The particular focus of his chapter is Noel Pearson’s Cape York Partnerships plan. Satour is critical of the plan, arguing that it signals the beginnings of a black authoritarian separatism which leverages white guilt and plays on black innocence. He cites a lack of consultation in early implementation of the plan, and draws on Black US politics to make his point about authoritarianism. While the latter is somewhat hyperbolic and alarmist, his points about the ‘rush to implement without informed,

open, or sustained debate’ (p. 48) are both relevant and important. Satour goes on to argue that ‘separatist walls ... are more leaky and porous than some would imagine, or perhaps care to admit’ (p. 69). Here Satour points to a key contemporary issue about Aboriginality, ‘Westernality’ and how these are differentiated, articulated, and how they intersect and interact. Unfortunately, while Satour at times identifies the complexity of this situation (see p. 73), he identifies only ‘three choices for Aboriginal people’ (p. 71): ‘integration into the mainstream economic and social systems’; ‘integration at the economic level and separation on the social’; and ‘separation from both the mainstream economic and social systems’ (pp. 71-72). This seems to unduly limit the possibilities. Furthermore, although Satour is writing from an Aboriginal point of view, this framing of possibilities seems to let white Australia escape too easily from these issues. For instance, questions such as how white Australia might need to reform or change are overlooked.

Steven Etherington, in ‘The Most Threatened People in Australia: the Remote Aboriginal Minority’, pp. 76-101, draws on his experience of living in a remote Aboriginal community to present a combination of thoughtful reflection and fine-grained analysis. This chapter is more confronting for white Australia than any of the other contributions and in many ways makes Etherington seem at odds with the views of his editor. Etherington details the ‘domination of the most remote Aboriginal communities by non-Aboriginal Australians’ (p. 76), and particularly the way ‘white powerholders have developed an almost completely impregnable system for managing the affairs of small Aboriginal communities’ (p. 85). He also identifies numerous contradictions of Australian policy-making in relation to remote Indigenous communities (pp. 79-80). Some of these (usefully) probe the integrity of recent reforms. For instance he states ‘we set up native title as a form of title for all of us, knowing that the Aboriginal people are not free to use native title land in any personal, economic way’ (p. 80). At times, Etherington is closer to Johns. For instance, he speaks of a ‘publicly-supported pseudo-traditional lifestyle ... producing unemployable people capable only of living in an artificial economic environment’ (p. 90). However, he does not advocate the sort of forced ‘choice’

which Johns calls for in eliminating state support. In his closing section, 'recommendations for employment', he demonstrates a reflexive concern for the welfare of people in the community in which he lived.

Stephanie Jarrett, in 'This Is As Much As We Can Do: Aboriginal Domestic Violence', pp. 102-124, argues that the assertion of cultural rights leads to difficulties in upholding human rights in relation to domestic violence against women. Rather than teasing out the complexities of this situation, Jarrett sides firmly with (culturally-specific) human rights. A lack of recognition of the cultural basis of human rights, including their liberal sensibilities, is evident in a number of judgments about culture and violence. For instance, she states that 'Aboriginal "cultural" settings frequently have an underdeveloped notion of the individual right to physical safety' (p. 104) and 'Aboriginal oppositions to domestic violence are likely to be inadequate' (p. 107) as if these are contraventions of a natural law. This seems strange given that she also cites examples of Indigenous frustration at 'white people's intolerance of violence' (p. 105). How are we to decide our approaches to violence? The urgency of the situation may lead Jarrett to advocate a more interventionist approach from the state (p. 123), but will this be undermined by Indigenous people – including Aboriginal women – who tend to 'sympathize with the perpetrator' (p. 115)? Although Jarrett's notions of over- and under-adaptation in service delivery (p. 108) are useful, they do not resolve this issue. Instead, Jarrett relies on the simple reassertion of human rights, stating that they 'cannot be conditioned by the application of "cultural rights"' (p. 123). However, no argumentation is provided, and the politics of the competing 'rights' and their intersection is not explored.

Helen McLaughlin's, 'Are We Headed in the Right Direction?', pp. 125-151, overviews the past 30 years of policy direction in Aboriginal affairs. Her chapter argues against an increased role for ATSIC and Aboriginal involvement in formal politics, particularly where this is based on Aboriginality or ethnicity (p. 148). This is accompanied by support for improved service delivery and programs, particularly those which encourage enterprise development (p. 126). Like

Johns, McLaughlin argues against 'separate development' and culturally-based programs instead foregrounding liberal entrepreneurialism and possibilities for economic development as the most positive direction for Aboriginal affairs (see pp. 137-138). She has kind words for the current government's 'practical reconciliation' approach. In sum, this chapter repeats the unsatisfactory pattern of Flanagan and Johns by drawing on a culturally-specific (liberal Western) framework to criticise programs and approaches articulated through culture and Aboriginality.

The final chapter in the volume, Kenneth Maddock's, 'Sceptical Thoughts on Customary Law', pp. 152-171, is, other than Etherington's chapter, the most satisfactory in the book. Maddock highlights the complexities of recognising customary law in a contemporary setting. This is a nuanced consideration which identifies problems with valorisation of customary law, and with its potential application in the Australian context. This leads Maddock to conclude, some would say compellingly, for a weak rather than strong recognition of customary law. However, moving beyond the specifics of customary law, there is a broader issue at stake here. Despite its more scholarly tone, Maddock repeats the opposition between 'culturalism' and 'liberalism' which characterises Johns' chapter without raising the difficult issue of how these are articulated or how they might be worked through. Maddock concludes in part by stating: 'I am opposed to strong recognition [of customary law], partly because of the authoritarianism and illiberality which would be required to carry it through...' (p. 169). Here the intersection of cultures which informs the earlier part of Maddock's discussion is trumped by liberalism without getting into the more murky issues of a coexistence which would respect both cultural traditions. This returns me to my introduction: important issues are raised in this volume but in the main, the values of the Western tradition predominate in the attempts to deal with them. The skepticism about claims articulated through Indigeneity and culture, as presented in this collection, will continue to be raised in Australian public debate. The challenge is to find more respectful and useful ways of discussing and engaging them. □