

Embedded Anthropology and the Intervention

Barry Morris and Andrew Lattas on cultural determinism and neo-liberal forms of racial governance

In June 2007, the Federal government staged a dramatic military-like take over of Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, which was orchestrated around a moral panic concerning allegations of pedophile rings and the sexual abuse of children. Exploiting a growing public awareness of serious social problems in remote Indigenous communities, the subsequent measures known as the Northern Territory Intervention were exempted from the Racial Discrimination Act. Many of the measures had little to do with violence and the protection of children from sexual abuse. Along with increased numbers of police, they included: the appointment of managers to oversee seventy-three prescribed communities; additional restrictions on alcohol and kava; quarantining of a proportion of welfare income; the introduction of an electronic card to monitor and restrict everyday purchases to licensed stores; suspension of the need for permits for entry to prescribed Indigenous areas; the abolition of the Community Development.

Employment Projects (CDEP); the compulsory acquisition of townships through five year leases; and the removal of traditional cultural considerations from judicial-criminal proceedings. As it unfolds, the Intervention has become a new form of racial governance, which seeks to assimilate and re-discipline Aboriginal families by transforming their everyday practices and cultural dispositions. It is especially the culture of remote Indigenous communities that has been focused on as dysfunctional and this has pushed anthropologists to the forefront to offer advice on how to care for and transform people through culture.

In Australian history the protection of Indigenous women and children has often provided the humanitarian language that has legitimised extraordinary interventions seeking greater control of Indigenous people's lives. There is nothing unusual about Indigenous people being governed through exceptional regimes of power that would be difficult or impossible to apply to non-Indigenous citizens. Whether it be the 'murderous activities of the frontier' or Indigenous people's incarceration onto reserves that functioned almost as total institutions, Indigenous Australians have regularly been governed through extraordinary interventions that promise to be

temporary until people have been normalised and transformed into self-governing disciplined subjects. As the ex-army officer and government minister who initiated the NT Intervention, Mal Brough, put it: ‘Stabilise, normalise, exit’.

It was Carl Schmitt who noted that sovereignty lies in the legal power to create exemptions to the norm. Developing this point, Giorgio Agamben argues that exceptional measures have been made into a modern-day technique of government. The current Intervention justifies its extraordinary necessity through moral critiques of the welfare state, the pathologies and dysfunctions of Indigenous culture, and the policies and institutions of self-determination. There is a collective pretence that it has not been inadequate funding, high staff turnover, poor planning, constantly changing policies and ineffective management which have led to poor health, education, housing, employment and material living standards for Indigenous people. Instead, Aboriginal culture and self-determination are blamed even though there is good reason to question the token and limited forms of self-management given to Indigenous citizens. Today, many politicians, academics and journalists justify the Intervention as a movement away from the abstract, wishy-washy, idealist, political objectives of Indigenous self-determination and towards realising practical, measurable goals that will truly benefit Indigenous communities.

Conveniently, this discourse shifts mainstream government failures onto Indigenous people—onto their assumed inability to govern themselves both at a collective and personal level.

Helping to legitimise the Intervention as the rational implementation of humanitarian objectives has been the creation of a huge statistical web around remote Indigenous people. Statistics dominates discussions about the Intervention’s legitimacy. Those statistics measure deviations from the norm and promise to adjust and calibrate interventions to produce social and cultural progress. Statistics serve to create for officials and Indigenous people a state of anxiety about the future health, education, employment and safety of loved ones, which allows the Intervention to offer itself as a practical solution. The Intervention could not exist without the production of this heightened sense of risk—without this statistically mediated and managed moral panic which exploits genuine public concern about child neglect and abuse. This rational web of humanitarian surveillance highlights Indigenous people’s collective

and personal failures; it measures supposedly their collective preparedness and individual willingness to care for themselves and their children. Statistics have become part of a governmental apparatus that confronts Indigenous people, that interpellates and problematises them by mirroring them back in ways that reinforce mainstream critiques and judgements that nowadays focus not on race but on poor cultural practices.

Contributing to the rationalisation and normalisation of the Intervention has been a widespread use of ethnographic data and anthropological theory by politicians, public servants, journalists and the wider public. Some anthropologists have actively embraced the public limelight to articulate cultural determinist arguments which criticize both customary and contemporary Indigenous culture as the true, hidden source of Indigenous problems. Whereas culture, especially 'traditional' culture, was previously seen as the salvation of Indigenous remote communities, the focus now is on uncovering and eliminating the dysfunctional aspects of Indigenous culture. Under the Intervention, the rise of cultural determinist arguments has operated as a form of psychological reductionism that allows for the internalisation of moral fault. Cultural determinism has worked to relocate the internalised sources of racial dysfunctionality from the realm of inherited biology to the realm of inherited culture. In terms of the history of anthropology, this is paradoxical for cultural analyses were once embraced and used to escape the reductionisms of biology and psychoanalysis, which posited their own internalised forms of dysfunctionality.

In public debate, a certain amount of ventriloquism has been involved on the part of senior anthropologists and other non-Indigenous commentators who invariably quote and hide behind leading Aboriginal intellectual brokers, such as Noel Pearson and his critiques of the welfare state as producing a culture of passivity and dysfunctionality in Indigenous communities. Pearson occupies a prominent place in conservative newspapers like *The Australian* which present his views as compatible with their own neo-liberal desires to wind back the welfare state or at least create a more tightly policed version of welfare that will continually monitor and refer subjects back to themselves. There is an ongoing desire to reshape welfare into a system of surveillance and tutelage that can transform subjects and subjectivities. Professors of anthropology Peter Sutton and Francesca Merlan in particular have supported the

current attempt to govern Indigenous people through instilling into them mainstream cultural dispositions. They accuse the welfare state of reinforcing aspects of Aboriginal culture which normalise and emphasise dependent states of being that are unsuited and dysfunctional in a modern world. Sutton calls for ‘a deep rather than superficial cultural redevelopment’. In her analysis of the school nutrition program re-introduced and expanded by the Intervention in ‘prescribed’ communities, Merlan warns against continuing it for too long because this might ‘make capacity for independent action a casualty’. Merlan here echoes neoliberal claims that welfare state interventions do not emancipate individuals, but imprison them in forms of passive dependency. The Intervention’s initiatives ‘must only be temporary’ and deployed for ‘the shaping of human capacity’.

At the same time as we recognise the importance of adequate nutrition, we must also recognise a need just as urgent, if not more so, that people in these communities see some reason to shoulder more effectively the social responsibilities, and recognise the implications, of feeding, cooking, and basic everyday activities.

What is anthropology, here, if not an ideological advocate for new pedagogic disciplinary technologies premised on an assumption that people do not shoulder fully their everyday, moral, domestic responsibilities. The fact that many Indigenous people choose not to cook in overcrowded houses with many visitors is treated as a learnt, dysfunctional, cultural trait rather than a strategic choice made in a situation where people cannot control access to the resources in a refrigerator or pantry. Buying ready-made store food and giving it directly to particular individuals ensures that they, at least, are looked after. Instead of looking for the causes of people’s everyday practices in the specificity of their current living conditions, there is a paternalistic assumption that people need to be taught how to realise their basic social responsibilities. Professor Jon Altman is one of the few anthropologists who has consistently publicly opposed the Intervention. In an important article he documents how anthropologists and public servants have re-contextualised and pathologised different Indigenous obligations to give. Lumping them together, they have homogenised different relations of reciprocity under the pejorative label of ‘demand sharing’. This treatment of Indigenous people as victims of a customary kinship system, which is deemed inappropriate and dysfunctional in a modern world, assumes

that they are prisoners of a faulty cultural logic. It is perhaps no accident that two major supporters of the Intervention, Sutton and Merlan, come out of a linguistic tradition, for their model of culture is of a fixed and, in this case, deficient cultural grammar. Both selectively use ethnography to claim that welfare dependency has deep cultural roots in Indigenous people's ritual, ceremonial and kinship obligations, such as between a mother's brother and his nephew. It is absurd to assume that Indigenous people do not make distinctions between modern and customary forms of dependency, let alone to assume analytically that they are similar phenomena.

This cultural reductionist argument of an inherent cultural tendency to dependency ignores the different historical periods when Indigenous people were employed in rural areas. It also ignores the scholarly anthropological work on northern Australia that has focused on cultural autonomy and creativity within Indigenous communities. Berndt, Tonkinson, Kolig, Mackinoly and Wainburranga, and Rose have documented the complex world of creative borrowings through which Indigenous people have resisted by reformulating dominant hegemonic structures. Whereas the Intervention posits dysfunctional passivity to be a consequence of welfare, there have been many creative local responses and resistance to welfare policing, including the Intervention.

Current justifications for the Intervention include claims that it protects women, children and families from the demands of relatives by ensuring that half of welfare income is quarantined. We do not question the sincerity of the motives of government or its academic supporters but we do question the selectivity of the forms of governmentality that are being deployed around Indigenous people. What right does the state have to manage people's gifts to each other or even the persistent demands of certain relatives? Currently, Indigenous people's quarantined welfare income (that is, half their payments) must be spent at certain approved stores using an electronic card, which monitors and prohibits expenditure on alcohol, tobacco, pornography and gambling. If families wish to purchase larger items, such as whitegoods, then they must submit a quote and a special request to Centrelink, which will directly pay the supplier. A huge, administrative, electronic panopticon has been established to watch over everyday purchases to ensure that they are spent on family-oriented goods. This disciplining of Indigenous forms of consumption seeks to disseminate mainstream models of family life and to internalise 'more rational' forms of subjectivity that use a

mainstream calculus in allocating scarce resources and affective care. The Australian Council of Social Services estimates that income management in the Northern Territory will affect approximately 20,000 individuals and cost \$4100 per person per annum to administer. Revealingly, the government has moved Indigenous people off community development work programs and onto welfare payments so they can become 'income managed'. When faced with a choice and a conflict between its own moral priorities, today's state, via its policies and practices, affirms the priority and transformative powers not of work but of keeping people in dependent tutelary states of surveillance.

As a social engineering project, the Intervention uses a massive surveillance system to realise not just health, education, food and welfare goals, for it also seeks to transform the desire and need for these forms of bio-security into mechanisms for reorganising Aboriginal forms of sociality. Diverse institutions for realising everyday needs such as health, education, food and welfare are used to create a carceral state around Indigenous people, where the systems of surveillance, discipline and pastoral care that belong to total institutions are diffused into the social body. It is not just in the Northern Territory that the carceral state is being expanded around Indigenous Australians but also in Western Australia and Queensland. There, schools have become a means of monitoring and disciplining parents, whose welfare payments are reduced if their children fail to attend school regularly. Justified as reducing future forms of welfare dependency by improving children's education, such measures use Indigenous people's dependence on government funds and services to create surveillance and disciplinary regimes that also promise to integrate Indigenous people into mainstream society. We are dealing with significant shifts in the political rationality of how to govern. In particular, the rationality of governance ultimately seeks to transfer and implant the management of the social risk of poverty, health and education within individuals and their communities, making both into self-governing moral units.

For its supporters, the Intervention is not repressive but 'positive' and 'productive' in advancing a distinct way of life. 'Evidence-based policy' is the government's euphemism for its new transformative practices and technologies. Their aim is to incorporate empirical and practical versions of the social sciences into the design of

more effective microtechnologies of social governance. In his philosophical analyses of European history, Michel Foucault related the emergence and development of the social sciences to the emergence and development of modern technologies of power. Foucault argued that power never exists independently of knowledge; instead structures of power create and deploy bodies of knowledge around the kinds of subjects they posit and seek to bring into being. As anthropologists, we are interested in why outdated and discredited bodies of anthropological knowledge have been revived in Australia under the Intervention. Concerns with social pathologies and cultural dysfunctions that featured in functionalist approaches in the 1940s were a form of anthropology suited to colonial concerns with the scientific administration of native subjects. In their contemporary teaching, many anthropologists will emphasise the importance of social functions, but they also point to functionalism as a morally laden approach that ignores how wider structures generate the socio-cultural practices labeled as dysfunctional. In Australia, it has not just been politicians, public servants and journalists who have rushed in to revive such problematic social science analyses, which internalise and subjectify the causes of social problems as moral problems, but also leading professors of anthropology, such as Peter Sutton, Francesca Merlan and Marcia Langton.

Currently, we are witnessing the emergence of a new form of compromised, conservative anthropology aligned with Australian government policies. Despite strong public disavowals of having a racial character, these are above all policies that deploy and experiment with new forms of racial governance. This ideological re-alignment of Australian anthropology dealing with Indigenous communities has been facilitated by three factors: 1) the transformation of many academics into part-time or full-time consultants who celebrate and feel morally empowered by their 'practical' concerns; 2) the corporatisation of Australian universities and their desire to demonstrate the practical relevance of academic disciplines to government, students and the wider public; and 3) the imposition of national interest agendas on all Australian Research Council grants. Despite their highly lucrative private remunerations, many contemporary consultant anthropologists keep a foothold in the university system which adds academic status to their practical advice. Authorised by government concerns and a popular moral panic, which they have helped to create, these anthropologists have used books, academic journals, newspapers, television and

the internet to propagate ideas which until very recently would be regarded as outdated ideological nonsense.

Local Indigenous communities do face real problems and difficulties, but does this legitimate creating coercive governmental structures around them, which it would be highly problematic, if not politically impossible, to apply to non-Indigenous citizens? Both Merlan and Sutton have justified the initial military-like entry into Indigenous communities as a theatre of power necessary to notify paedophiles, bullies, drug addicts and corrupt oligarchs that their time is over. Both use ethnographic familiarity with Indigenous communities to personalise the need for exceptional forms of state power, which lump together diverse social problems and ignore other, more effective solutions.

Merlan and Sutton believe race has been overemphasised in explaining Indigenous people's social problems and they especially reject seeing the Intervention as having a racial character. As Merlan puts it: 'we should move away from the centrality of objection to the intervention as "racially discriminatory"'. Continuing a long tradition of conservative Australian anthropology, which often simplifies and marginalises 'race' as an analytic category, she argues, 'Race does not, and never has, offered a full account of the burdens of marginalisation and dependency that these communities have come to face, nor of the social and cultural specificity with which they do so. Other factors, in combination with race, lie behind the plausibility of intervention that the government seized upon'. We do not dispute the existence of other factors but what needs to be noted is how some Australian anthropologists will in a token way acknowledge that race cannot be dismissed from explanations of subordination and marginalisation. However, the other factors that they evoke in their supposedly more complicated picture invariably work to edit out and minimise race and especially cultures of racial resistance.

Highly problematic is Merlan's use of anthropology to argue that the historical and socio-cultural specificity of Indigenous groups makes it often inappropriate to apply universal human rights. Such arguments prop up the Intervention in the face of international criticism that it breaches international human rights treaties. Like many commentators, Merlan participates in an ideological construction of the practical which is celebrated and juxtaposed against idealist abstract politics. Today, this

simplistic dichotomy is frequently used to criticise international attempts to constrain Australian government policy by what Professor Merlan calls ‘rights normativity’. Drawing on the ethnographic specificity of Indigenous communities, Merlan argues that ‘universalist understandings of rights can be problematic in their application to people whose social lives differ from the mainstream’. Yet the whole point of universal human rights was to protect marginal groups from being created by their national governments into a legal state of exception. Reproducing Sutton’s argument, Merlan claims that a political culture emphasising rights and treating them as a form of protection has emerged since World War II and that: ‘This makes us incapable of imagining kinds of arrangements in which rights do not occupy the same position or are not conceived in the way we conceive of them’. Here, it is anthropology’s cultural relativism, its celebration of cultural pluralism, which is mobilised to claim that ‘the universality of equal rights’ does not fit in with the culture of Australia’s Indigenous people. Such sweeping ahistorical cultural claims raise questions about anthropological ventriloquism, which involves anthropologists revoicing their own political position as the cultural voice of informants. It is scandalous to use anthropology’s familiarity with the alterity of Indigenous cultures to legitimise their legal alterity, their transformation into a modern state of exception.

For Merlan, an emphasis on rights is based on a notion of the separate and distinct individual and that Aborigines have alternative ways of thinking about obligations. ‘It is illusory to think of an individualistic and oppositional notion of rights as less coercive than other kinds of possibilities that might be developed.’ Philosophers such as Hannah Arendt are called in to question our commitment to the ‘right to have rights’ and instead what is asserted is the importance of our concern to assist effectively ‘rather than doggedly assume the applicability of a single, allegedly universalist system of rights’. Merlan even claims that Aboriginal customary culture accords rights a secondary status as compared to responsibility. The respected anthropologist Fred Myers is used to provide ethnographic authority to this tricky distinction which is of dubious relevance for discussing the modern relationship of the state to Indigenous people. What is also not questioned is whether Indigenous understandings of responsibility can be equated with how responsibility is formulated within a neo-liberal model of welfare that speaks of mutual obligations and the responsibilities of welfare recipients.

Currently, parts of Australian anthropology have become a means of realigning Indigenous people's voices and needs with a government position that manufactures the practical as being in opposition to Indigenous political rights. Claiming to be engaged in capacity-building, this new humanitarian ideology rearticulates neo-liberal views that Indigenous people and their culture are harmed by the 'free' care and rights that we give them and will be improved by more intrusive, controlling forms of care and conditional rights. While some anthropologists may believe that it is ethnography and social theory that underpin their views, it is possible to see the influence of popular neo-liberal understandings that claim we have been too soft in policing Indigenous communities (even though Aborigines form a disproportionately high percentage of the prison population) and too soft with welfare payments. There is a demand for Aborigines to give something back, despite their economic poverty. But what can they give back except tokens of compliance to mainstream norms? They must display appropriate evidence of a new found self-discipline through being supposedly more caring and diligent about their family's health, sending their children to school, cooking regular meals, and shopping in a responsible way. These are not just practical measures but disciplinary forms of racial hegemony that demand symbols of Indigenous people's acquiescence and compliance to the dominant culture's norms. These micro forms of everyday governance seek to problematise Indigenous people by implying, for example, that if parents do not cook regular meals or cannot ensure their children attend school regularly that these parents do not love or care for their children, that they are morally dysfunctional.

Nikolas Rose argues perceptively that modern ways of assembling risk are intimately related to the valorisation of community as a site of policing. Increasingly replacing the previous space of the 'social', 'community' emerges as the new space of governance, as the territory for new interventions. Along these lines, the Intervention needs to be seen in the wider context of other government measures introduced throughout Australia where Indigenous communities have been pushed into mutual obligation agreements, which seek to transform them into self-policing and self-disciplining communities. We disagree to some extent with Altman and Hinkson's argument that the 'individual' has replaced the 'community' as the focus of neo-liberal welfare concerns.

Both inform contemporary state practices, with technologies of individuation existing alongside a renewed emphasis and demand for communities to be self-policing. In Western Australia, on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert, the small Aboriginal community of Mulan signed up to what has been called a 'Hygiene Pact'. In return for government financial aid to install a petrol bowser, the community undertook to implement a program to ensure their children showered everyday and washed their faces twice a day, and rubbish bins were emptied twice a week. Such neo-liberal policies are not directly aimed at minimising welfare costs, but more at maximising the welfare system's transformative efficacy. They are framed as part of a long-term goal to reduce welfare costs though first training people in the disciplinary social habits that will facilitate them joining the workforce. Here hygiene and health join job training and education to create a disciplinary carceral state around remote Indigenous people.

For many years, the welfare system has been progressively tightened up around non-Indigenous citizens, creating a surveillance system of self-reporting around the unemployed that seeks to instill psychological discipline and aspirational capacities. It is the capacity to have ongoing hope for a job which is being monitored through the pastoral reporting regimes of a welfare state. With regard to Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, the Australian state has gone further in its demands that welfare not be passive and has sought to perfect a system of welfare surveillance which seeks to be pedagogic while also operating as a form of punishment for being dependent. When Indigenous people on welfare gain employment, they become free of welfare quarantining whatever their personal qualities. It is work that confers individual independence, with welfare conferring a contingent form of freedom, a tutelary state of being subject to monitoring by structures which have their own pastoral objectives and techniques for creating subjects.

Merlan and Sutton's emphasis that it is not poverty but culture that leads Aborigines to seek out dependencies is part of what has been called the Queensland school of anthropology. Apart from playing down race, it has also systematically played down and criticised anthropologists who have focused on contemporary Aboriginal forms of resistance. Other anthropologists, like Jeff Collmann and Barry Morris, who were part of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Adelaide, have documented

the opposite, namely, Indigenous people seeking autonomy and seeking to evade capture and control by the welfare state. Today, it is not the essentialisms and determinisms of biology that serve to racialise Indigenous people but certain psycho-cultural essentialisms and determinisms that treat Indigenous people as prisoners of embedded cultural logics or grammars. Culture has replaced race as the new way of producing internalised essentialisms. Social problems are reduced to cultural problems and, indeed, to moral problems, to the inappropriate or dysfunctional use of Indigenous moral schemes.

Australia was founded as a penal colony, as a site for experimenting with the breaking and remaking of selves. Later, after the convicts, Australia's Indigenous population provided the ultimate subordinate group, which was experimented with through incarceration into various kinds of total institutions run by church and government. Freed from these direct forms of moral supervision and discipline, Indigenous people now exist within the care of a carceral state where the surveillance and pastoral technologies of the prison, mission, government reserve and the asylum have been moved into everyday institutions. The NT Intervention is a huge experiment in tightening up this carceral state through increased forms of surveillance that use not just more police and non-Indigenous administrators but also schools, health, housing, welfare payments and even licensed shops. The aim is to instill a moral watchfulness and discipline in Indigenous people which will normalise and transform them into mainstream citizens who use an alternative calculus in their social relations. It is mainstream forms of the economic which are being disseminated as a way of grounding and forming subjectivity and social life.

The scandal of contemporary Australian anthropology is that it bends its ethnography and twists its theory to legitimise these new forms of racial hegemony, which claim that the securing of modern forms of bio-security requires the suspension of Indigenous people's civil rights and their hopes for self-determination.

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Andrew Lattas did his PhD on changes in newspaper discourse in colonial New South Wales and has subsequently published on the changing knowledge/power nexus that informs race relations in Australia. He has two books—*Cultures of Secrecy and Dreams, Madness and Fairytales in New Britain*—which focus on millenarian movements and local popular attempts to reformulate race and modernity in Melanesia.

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