

# Interventions

David Trigger

CULTURE CRISIS:  
ANTHROPOLOGY AND POLITICS  
IN ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA  
edited by Jon Altman and Melinda  
Hinkson

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Anthropology's significant contribution to both academic and applied research focused on Indigenous Australia has intensified over the last four decades. Among Aboriginal people and anthropologists themselves, debates have occurred as to the discipline's earlier alignments with colonialism, and also its clear distinction among other social sciences as achieving deep understanding of Indigenous life. From the mid 1970s to the present, there has been a substantial effort from anthropologists both within and outside the universities to investigate a wide range of practical matters, including land claims, native title applications, cultural heritage issues, and related development project negotiations. These days, anthropologists with some experience in this work will likely find themselves in considerable demand from Indigenous organisations, governments, and industry groups.

Against this background, *Culture Crisis* brings together contributions from fifteen anthropologists, who deal with aspects of the Emergency Response Intervention in Australia's Northern Territory begun in June 2007. Prompted by reports of child sexual abuse and related crisis social conditions in Aboriginal communities, the Intervention constituted a turning away from government policies of self-determination. The editors introduce the book's uniting theme as intense contestation about the significance and future of Indigenous 'culture'. The issue running across all chapters is how best to understand and explain the contesting desires, among Aboriginal people

and in the wider society, for cultural continuity as well as for urgently needed improvements in the circumstances of everyday Indigenous life.

In the debates about the Intervention, much focus is on the legacy of colonisation. To what extent is current dysfunction caused by structural economic and political conditions rather than by continuing and/or transformed aspects of culture? Does cultural relativism mean scholars and practitioners cannot or should not make moral judgements when faced with sexual and other violence, and with child welfare issues in Aboriginal communities? Melinda Hinkson's introduction points out the typically close working relationships between anthropologists and community members; hence, publicly to criticise Indigenous culture 'may be regarded as an act of betrayal'. Moreover, researchers can become aware of local views that eschew dramatic focus on suffering and violence, at times because of local pride in a community's public reputation, or because of the impression of a high tolerance for extraordinary levels of violence and ill health. Hinkson asks whether anthropologists have been 'wedged' between denying that there is a desperate problem, and acceding to the government's terms as to appropriate action.

The book's chapters range widely in addressing these issues. Elizabeth Povinelli wants a focus on 'the nature of liberal power' rather than any 'crisis of culture'. It is neo-liberal ideology that should be the target, as she regards the state's attempts to address social crises as an ideologically driven act of policing. Rather than stressing 'internal pathologies' of communities, anthropologists should analyse the institutional arrangements within which violence and ill health are produced. Jeremy Beckett wants more research on change; studying principles of traditional culture needed to support land claims is oriented towards legal requirements, he suggests, and not 'the canons of anthropology'. For Gillian Cowlshaw, entering the fray of public debate and policy-making takes us too far from academic 'principles of critical enquiry and open-mindedness'. Anthropology should not be an

'instrument of government' and should turn the analytical gaze towards 'the nature of state institutions'; government personnel are engaged in attempts at social engineering, and 'cannot know what they do'.

Peter Sutton's well-publicised book *The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the End of the Liberal Consensus* (2009), written by an anthropologist highly engaged with, yet also critical of, various aspects of Indigenous culture, is both praised and critiqued throughout the volume. Andrew Lattas and Barry Morris condemn it as having been used to support the rationale for the Intervention. Their complaint that Sutton's work 'is not written as an anthropological text, but an easy-to-read mass-market book' suggests a distaste for intellectuals contributing to public debate in accessible language. Lattas and Morris's contribution is fixed on theory, arguing that the Intervention incorporates culture into 'neoliberal forms of racial governance'. Their suggestion that concepts such as 'passive welfare', 'dysfunctionality', and 'embedded cultural practices' are 'empty' or 'dubious' presumably means they are inadequate for explaining societal outcomes.

Marcia Langton is clear, however, that such arguments remain ideological, and do not engage with the reality of escalating rates of alcohol and drug abuse, violence against women and children, and child neglect in remote Aboriginal life. Langton is critical of a naïve 'failure to understand the agency of Indigenous people themselves in the transition to modernity'. Indeed, those writers for whom analysis of the state as enemy is the main game are indicative of a 'predictable postcolonial dilemma [that] has gripped the anthropological imagination in Australia'. The earlier authority of a gerontocracy in Aboriginal culture no longer exists in much of Australia, she says, and anthropology should face up to the realities of cultural change.

Francesca Merlan does this, addressing the complexities of the Intervention-trigger issue of child sexual abuse, noting a lack of evidence for widespread paedophilia as such, but also the apparent normalisation of 'exploitative sexual behaviour'. The rate of child sexual

abuse is disproportionately high in remote communities, but there are diverse phenomena brought under this general label, including 'apparent normalization of self- and peer-motivated activity by children and young people regularly engaging in sex at ... very young ages, both among themselves, and with adults for money or favours'. Merlan includes herself among supporters of 'the need for intervention', but is critical of the 'Intervention as launched', as it is based only on a deficit or negative view of Aboriginal communities and lacks understanding of Indigenous child-rearing and socialisation practices.

Diane Austin-Broos wants better linkage of forms of suffering to causes. Violence in Aboriginal communities derives from 'history, power and policy as well as individual pathology'. She characterises applied research outside the university as an approach that works 'solely or pre-eminently in terms of service delivery to a separate culture', hence inhibiting 'a truly critical' perspective. However, her critique of David Martin's applied study on the cultural roots of Aboriginal violence fails to make this case. Indeed, Martin's work exemplifies the way anthropological focus on culture can also encompass history and structural legacies of colonialism as combined causal drivers of domestic and other violence.

Tim Rowse considers structural 'social exclusion' in Aboriginal communities, and points out that it is complex to measure and not equivalent solely to disparity in comparative economic indicators. It is too simple to assume that to be unemployed is to be socially excluded. While anthropology's qualitative investigations are more likely to focus on whether children are participating in traditional ceremonies than on whether they are attending formal schooling, the discipline is well positioned to demonstrate the importance of engaging with the reality of distinctly Aboriginal domains of sociality. These are positively experienced enclaves, presumably derived at least in part from Indigenous cultural traditions, and they constitute 'much more than a zone of exclusion' from the wider society.

Emma Kowal takes us to the ques-

tion of whether remote outstation living is good for Aboriginal health, as argued by some professionals who support Indigenous assertions of this kind. While the question remains open, a contrary indicator is that national surveys show that 'those Indigenous Australians with the most language and culture ... are precisely those with the worst health'. So why do 'progressive Australians' believe, almost as a matter of political faith, that traditional culture is good for health? Kowal turns the anthropologist's gaze towards 'White anti-racists', arguing that taking such positions on Indigenous affairs does 'identity work' for those on the progressive left. Supporting remote outstations offers a moral solution for those seeking a symbolic corrective to the colonising obliteration of traditional culture.

Tess Lea focuses on anthropology's lack of engagement with Aboriginal education issues, research tending instead 'toward more removed analyses of the structural relations of power and of the cultural miscuing that are all too readily observable in the average intercultural classroom'.

Yasmine Musharbash argues that the Intervention has escalated mistrust and fear between residents of Yuendumu in Central Australia and non-local whitefellas. Thus the Northern Territory is 'becoming two worlds, populated by two peoples, who travel different roads, not only metaphorically but literally'. Somewhat surprisingly, she does not address the question of such social distance operating prior to, and hence apart from, the Intervention. Melinda Hinkson also writes about Yuendumu, presenting an engaging discussion of several Aboriginal residents' messages to the pages of a national newspaper. However, there is silence here on those who may support the Intervention. Only those Aboriginal people who 'have a deep anxiety' about the aims and implications of the government's intentions are discussed.

Nicolas Peterson suggests that transformations in remote Aboriginal life are inevitable. Achieving improvements in material well-being will entail broader cultural change. Anthropologists and others should avoid what can

be an unfortunate 'discourse of enchantment' with aspects of Indigenous culture. However, the book ends with Jon Altman's counter concern that such change is being forced. Returning to a theme that he has written on widely, Altman argues that remote Aboriginal people are best understood as sustaining customs that can coexist with a degree of economic participation. This is through a 'hybrid economy' whereby productive activities that derive from Indigenous cultural traditions can produce financial incomes. The alleged utility of this concept is illustrated with reference to Aboriginal paid work on environmental management and through art production.

In common with at least half the contributors to this volume, Altman's view is unambiguously condemnatory of the Intervention. Pursuing increasing Aboriginal participation in the economic mainstream is, in his view, 'the latest discursive and policy assault of the settler colonial society on diversity and difference that remain enduring features of Aboriginal societies in remote Australia'. The Intervention is part of a 'grand narrative' that is 'insidious and ideological' and based on neo-liberal logic.

The value of this weighty volume is that the editors' position is not the only one that is given space. The book is as much about anthropology's multiple theoretical approaches, and the political orientations of practitioners, as it is about the Intervention as such. The reader will not learn extensive details about the Intervention's raft of specific policies, nor how they are being implemented on the ground. This begs the question of the intended audience for the book and whether anthropology has potentially more to offer those Aboriginal people and others concerned with practical outcomes than what is presented in this collection. What is clear, however, is that anthropologists are divided on the major issues of principle raised by the Intervention. The book's overriding message is that taking a position on this important societal issue is not as easy as some suggest. ■

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