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Genocide and Colonialism, II: Discussing a recent international conference on 'Genocide and Colonialism' and its implications for Australian debates

Abstract

Lorenzo Veracini reviews a recent international conference on 'Genocide and Colonialism' and its implications for Australian debates.

Keywords

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Genocide and Colonialism, II:

Discussing a recent international conference on 'Genocide and Colonialism' and its implications for Australian debates.

by Lorenzo Veracini

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"Genocide and Colonialism" was a three-day conference, the first of its kind to be held in Australia, and the first academic symposium explicitly addressing Australian histories together with comparative approaches to genocide studies. The range of topics that were covered included Armenia, Asia, Africa, the Holocaust, biopolitics, anthropology; and the level of international participation was also impressive. Among others, Ben Kiernan (Yale University) presented a comparative appraisal of genocidal atrocities in Cambodia and East Timor. Although Australian academics have been involved in ongoing controversies about Australian genocides, this conference should constitute a marker in public discussions. While this review concentrates on the Australian reverberations of this conference, it should be stressed that the main topic was not necessarily the Australian history of genocide.

When Ann Curthoys and John Docker edited a special issue of *Aboriginal History* on the same subject in 2001, they felt a need to stress that a debate was still ongoing; one way of doing so was to add a question mark to their title.¹ In this respect, however, this conference took a stance and assumed the intrinsic concurrency of both 'colonialism' and 'genocide'. Nonetheless, as the conference organiser Dirk Moses stressed in his opening remarks, the aims of the conference were intellectual and not directly political: more than representing an acceleration in an ongoing debate, this choice simply acknowledged the clear relationship between genocide and colonialism - in Australia as well as in other colonial and settler locales. Of course, one need not reduce the latter to the former: in this sense, it was a matter of exploring this relationship rather than establishing that one does exist, and only neo-colonialists still dispute such a relationship. This conference was very much about this connection: is it possible to develop an interpretative framework that routinely includes what has become known as 'genocide studies' in the study of the experience of Aboriginal people? The answer, I believe, was a convincing 'yes'.

The two introductory presentations from Heather Goodall (University of Technology, Sydney) and Mark Levene (University of Southampton) were striking in their difference: indeed, they could not have been further from each other. While it was a fascinating way to approach the conference - two "entries" leading to the conference, one involving a survey encompassing no less than five continents ("Empires, Native Peoples and Genocide") and

another relating to two New South Wales river systems ("Response to Keynote Address") - this distance espoused a first set of very problematic intellectual relationships. Indeed, the communication between the Australian-based content of the conference and its comparative and international expertises was at times very difficult. Nevertheless, the conference endeavoured to balance these two subject matters with success, and the uneasiness with which Levene's survey of genocidal activities in extra-European settings during the latter half of the nineteenth century was greeted had shifted considerably by the end of the conference.

One of the problems with local debates surrounding genocide - also a problem the organisers of the conference have set out to address - is that it is often equated with the Holocaust and implies for many total physical extermination. An important part of the history relating to the Aboriginal experience wants to stress Aboriginal survival and cultural endurance, however. While serious historians agree that there was a degree of extermination, they also stress that survival entailed a considerable degree of accommodation. This is where the 'agency' issue comes in - in not depicting Aboriginal people as hapless victims. Genocide studies, however, can address these concerns, and Dirk Moses has stressed this dynamic in a recent article published in the *Journal of Genocide Research*, in which he argues that the genocidal moments in Australia's past were especially provoked by effective and stiff Aboriginal resistance.² In the specific case of Australia, it is the realisation that the high number of little and localised colonial genocides had failed to dispose of the Aboriginal population - that is, when the colonial expectation that the Aborigines should disappear proved unfulfilled - that produces another genocide impulse, in the form of the systematic removal of children. Robert van Krieken has dealt with these issues in the *British Journal of Sociology*.³

There is a somewhat intractable contradiction evident in the evolution of approaches to writing Aboriginal history, especially for non-Indigenous historians. On the one hand, there is the understandable necessity of rejecting genocide (Lyndall Ryan's work on *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, for example - I refer to her work because it was personally attacked by Keith Windschuttle and because his denialism was mentioned repeatedly during the conference, but this goes for much of the Aboriginal history of the 1970s and 1980s).⁴ At a time when some Aboriginal communities were denied their rights on the basis of an historically given and irreversible 'genocide', and 'authentic' Aboriginal identity was being challenged on that basis, Indigenous and non-Indigenous historians were engaged in breaking the silence and addressing the historical erasure. On the other hand, there is the obvious imperative to reintroduce genocide into the historical debates (a tendency which is informing the current historiographical phase). An insistence on the facts of Aboriginal survival and the exploration of the strategies that allowed it and made it possible necessarily denies that a genocide understood as total extermination has happened; yet the very history of white-Aboriginal relations in this country demands the use of the notion of genocide. (Incidentally, this contradictory itinerary provides more contrary evidence against Windschuttle's notion of a conspiracy/fabrication of Aboriginal history - historians have obviously wrangled with contrasting issues and needs rather than following a scheme.) While Curthoys' paper ("Genocide in the Archives: The Fate of the Indigenous Tasmanians Reconsidered") and Ryan's intervention did address these issues in the conclusive panel of the conference, this remains a very concrete problem for historians and scholars involved in Aboriginal issues, a question that surfaced repeatedly during the conference. Highlighting genocide may then be problematic because it brings into question notions of Aboriginal continuity and may create problems for those engaged in the assertion of Aboriginal rights as surviving special rights. In the specific context of post Mabo Australian legislation, Aboriginal genocides may lead to the contestation of recognisable claims to native title. In his conclusive speech on the stolen generations, for example, Jason Field, of the Jumbunna House of Indigenous Learning at UTS, was particularly cautious in using the terminology of genocide

(The Stolen Generations and Genocide: Past Practices - Contemporary Responses).

Expectedly, one of the thorniest issues the conference had to confront was the issue of definition. Many were dissatisfied with the legal approach embodied by the 1948 UN definition of genocide and its relevance for historical research and scholarship. Raymond Evans has proposed to use 'indigenocide' instead, an understanding he had already outlined in an article he has published recently with Bill Thorpe in *Overland*.⁵ This discussion on definitions seemed also to be reiterating the need to draw a line between historical and forensic approaches. With his typical talent for encapsulating complex notions in a nutshell, Evans has stressed the necessary differentiation that there should be between "writing a book" and "catching a crook". The need to redefine what I would call the "rules of engagement" for historical research emerged strongly from this conference and was the subject of Robert van Krieken's paper. More generally, the relationship between legal thought and historical scholarship was one area in which the discussion became especially strained. Departing from these difficulties, John Docker's paper ("Are Settler Colonies Inherently Genocidal? Some Thoughts on Lemkin"), reconstructing Raphaël Lemkin's original formulation of the concept of genocide vis-vis the very existence of the United States as a settler and racialised society, broadened and grounded this debate.

Docker thus introduced another issue that was extensively addressed at the conference: that is, whether settler colonialism constitutes a suitable interpretative category in genocide studies (including Australia). Many of the papers, including the keynote address from Norbert Finzsch (University of Cologne) and my own, explored the way in which the colonial gaze produces expectations that short circuit in a genocidal impulse at the moment when colonialism becomes aware of its limits. Ghassan Hage (University of Sydney) also talked about this tendency by using the Spinozian category of "the will to live" for a community, suggesting that this should be understood as the true object of a genocidal act. More specifically, Jürgen Zimmerer (University of Coimbra) presented what I believe is a viable test case of this tendency when speaking of the genocide of the Hereros in South West Africa in 1904-5. In this case, the military genocide that followed just another case of anticolonial insubordination was the result of a decision taken despite - and in fact against - local colonial interest, a determination the military commanders based on their expectation that Southwest Africa needed to be a white settler country.⁶ This notion of a settler-related typology of genocide appears especially meaningful in the case of Australia, where a succession of genocidal impulses has characterised the long lasting evolution of a specifically settler-determined body politic.

"Genocide and Colonialism", The Women's College, The University of Sydney, 18-21 July 2003. The conference was sponsored by the Humanities Research Centre, the Australian National University, and the Herbert and Valmae Freilich Foundation.

The conference organiser is planning an edited volume, supplemented by commissioned chapters on topics that could not be addressed at the conference.

Lorenzo Veracini is a lecturer in History and Politics at the University of the South Pacific, Suva.

1. A. Curthoys, J. Docker (eds), "Genocide? Australian Aboriginal History in International Perspective", *Aboriginal History*, 25, 2001. See also L. Veracini, "Genocide and Colonialism": In Conversation with Lorenzo Veracini, Ann Curthoys and John Docker discussing some of the issues at stake for Aboriginal history in current international debates about the definitions of genocide", *Australian Humanities Review*, September 2002, <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-September-2002/veracini.html>.

2. D. Moses, "An Antipodean Genocide? The Origins of the Genocidal Moment in the Colonization of Australia," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2:1, 2000, 89-107.
3. R. Van Krieken, "The Barbarism of Civilization: Cultural Genocide and the Stolen Generations?" *The British Journal of Sociology*, 50:2, 295-313.
4. See L. Ryan, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians*, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1981; and K. Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One, Van Diemen's Land, 1803-1847*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 2002.
5. R. Evans, B. Thorpe, "Indigenocide and the Massacre of Aboriginal History", *Overland*, 163, 2001, pp. 21-39.
6. See also J. Zimmerer, *Deutsche Herrschaft über Afrikaner: Staatlicher Machtanspruch und Wirklichkeit im kolonialen Namibia*, Hamburg, 2002.

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