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Indigenous policy formation in the neoliberal age?

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The Australian federal Indigenous policy landscape has been a tumultuous racialised space over the last twenty-three years.

The Australian federal election in 1996 facilitated a range of debates around Indigenous rights and policy. A form of racism found expression as a ‘backlash’ against the so-called benefits and rights that First Nations people had achieved over the previous thirty years. Politically, much of the public debate sought to question the appropriateness of Indigenous rights by asserting that First Nations people’s interests were privileged over and above those of the general population and, secondly, by questioning the integrity of First Nations people’s claims under Australian legislation, such as native title, land rights and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage protection laws. This position was present in a range of right-wing discourses from the speeches of the new Prime Minister John Howard to the speeches of the newly elected federal independent member of Parliament, Pauline Hanson, to the public statements of representatives from the mining industry to the articles written by conservative anthropologist Ron Brunton published in the Courier Mail.

In 1997, the federal government itself, through the intervention of the then Prime Minister John Howard, asserted in an interview on national television that the: “pendulum has swung too far” (Howard, 1997). The next ten years saw a winding back of Indigenous rights in Australian law and policy (Howard-Wagner, 2008).

In 2007, the federal government, under the Prime Ministership of John Howard declared a state of emergency in Indigenous townships and town camps within around two weeks of the release of *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle, “Little Children are Sacred” Report* (Wild & Anderson, 2007). The state of emergency was constructed in federal government discourses as a humanitarian emergency and an immediate crisis. The crafting of this story by the Howard government at the declaration of a national emergency in Aboriginal townships and town camps of the Northern Territory in July 2007, and subsequent stories by the Rudd and Gillard governments, have succeeded in socially producing what Charles Mills’s refers to as a collective white ignorance (Mills, 2013).

The ten years following the 'Northern Territory Intervention' saw the rolling out of an era of new paternalism in federal Indigenous policy. First Nations people, their organisations and communities were now governed through an array of coercive and punitive neoliberal policies from Income Management (2007 to present) to the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (2014 to present).

What will happen in the next moment is hard to predict. If past behaviour is a predictor of future behaviour, then the Indigenous policy landscape will remain punitive and fractured amidst tumultuous neoliberal times.

The purpose of this brief paper is to explain what a critical race and whiteness approach offers in terms of scholarly efforts to understand contemporary Australian Indigenous policy formation in the neoliberal age. Over the last thirteen years, I have written a series of articles which explore how contemporary Indigenous policy reinforces whiteness through a reordering of the social world along neoliberal lines, eviscerating the rights of First Nations people. My analysis is concerned with how the racialised neoliberal state retains a vested interest in maintaining what Foucault describes as 'the order of things' (Foucault, 2005). It is an approach that has allowed me to reveal not only the paradoxes in Australian federal Indigenous policy formation, such as how the neoliberal state reproduces racialised social exclusion, as well as expose how whiteness is deeply embedded in Indigenous policy formation, but also to unpack specific Indigenous policies, such as the *Northern Territory Intervention* and *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage*, as racial projects (Winant, 2004).

Broadly, my attention has turned to the neoliberal racial state (Howard-Wagner, 2010, 2012, 2015, 2018). This approach is complemented by an emerging body of scholarship on the theorisation of the neoliberal racial state and whiteness (Goldberg, 2002, 2009; Winant, 2004; Mills, 2013, 2015). However, I take a different approach to much of this scholarship in that my attention does not turn to state domination, but rather an analysis of how power relations have been *rationalised* through state institutions, including political institutions, such as governments (Foucault, 1997). Like Foucault, I am interested in "the procedures of normalisation exercised in the name of the power of the state, demands of society or of population zones ..." (Foucault, 1997, p. 129). It is the study of the practical systems and the strategic side of practices, the political rationalities and technologies of governing through whiteness in the neoliberal age that I turn my attention to (Foucault, 1997).

I consider the points I have made over the years about the intersections between race, whiteness and neoliberalism in the context of Indigenous policy to be well reinforced in the work of Charles Mills. In his eloquent essay titled *Piercing the Veil*, Mills (2015) reminds us that neoliberalism prescribes to an 'atomic individualist ontology' and is characterised by an insensitivity to social context and social structure and a general unwillingness to recognise structural barriers to equal opportunity. Thus, as Mills declares, "[s]ince race signifies different social histories and divergent social locations, such a framework has the effect not of eliminating race, but of establishing as the reference point a 'racelessness' that is in effect centred on white modality" (p. 84). As Mills writes, "[t]he abstract neoliberal subject is not formally racialised, but obviously these policies have a radically disparate impact on different groups because of the past history of racially differentiated and discriminatory treatment" (2015, p. 84). Aside from "its atomic individualist ontology... neoliberalism is also committed to the slashing or elimination altogether of the safety net of the

welfare state” (Mills 2015, 83). It is a rationality in which whiteness is epistemologically privileged.

The political push for a rights-based individualism, which is the idea that all people should be treated equally, while ignoring the existence of group categories and differences, has been no starker than in relation to efforts to overcome *Indigenous disadvantage*. The original policy of ‘practical’ Reconciliation (1996), which morphed into the *National Indigenous Reform Agreement – Closing the Gap* (2008) and then later manifested as *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* (2009), separated the practical from the symbolic. This political ontology opens up the national space to include special programmes to address *practical* disadvantage in the areas of health, housing, employment and education, but closes it off in relation to symbolic recognition like a separate body such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) or a formal voice in parliament. Over time, this ontology has manifested in political discourses in relation to the excesses of native title (1996 and 1997) to the abolition of ATSIC (2004) and to the rejection of the Uluru Statement from the Heart proposals (2018).

This focus on racialised governmentality also allows me as a critical race and whiteness studies scholar to expose the damaging epistemic effects of neoliberal state practices around Indigenous policy formation and implementation. For example, it provides me with the tools to expose the injustice that has occurred in this social-epistemic policy space whereby governments and bureaucrats as the credible knowers have discursively claimed interpretive authority over either the state defined individual *Australian* Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person or the “Australian Indigenous population” as a collective disadvantaged sub-set of the Australian population, who is entitled to ‘practical’ rights to education, employment, housing and health. I have used this approach to expose how policy discourses narrowly contain not only the rights, but also the identities of First Nations peoples.

This approach too provides the tools to unpack political discourses about Indigenous disadvantage in a way that not only reveals the entrenched deficits framing in the mindset of Australian politicians, but also how Indigenous disadvantage has been disassociated from the Australian social body, its institutions, and larger racialised social patterns and society (Howard-Wagner, 2019).

This goes to the heart of what sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argued in his address as the President of the American Sociological Association in 2017. That is, we can reveal how (although race is socially constructed as with all social categories), “[race] is a never-finished product...” (Bonilla-Silva, 2017, p. 1). While Bonilla-Silva argues that doing more research will not free anyone from history or advance the project of bringing down racist societies, I believe that a critical race and whiteness approach forces us out of our comfort zones and it commits us to a larger struggle. It gives us a voice and a way of exposing and speaking back in dark times when the social world and Australian society is being reordered along neoliberal lines, exposing “the deeper pathologies of power” (Farmer, 2003, p. 21) and structural violence through which whiteness operates in the 21st century.

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