

**Book Review: *Culture Crisis: Anthropology and Politics in Aboriginal Australia*, Edited by Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson, UNSW Press, 2010.**

One of this book's contributors, Tess Lea, succinctly sums up its content by describing it as part of 'a raging debate tormenting anthropologists [that] concerns anthropology's role in the failures of social Indigenous policy'. Following the 'history wars' of the past decade, we now have the equally bitter and venomously contested 'anthropology wars'. The current battle appears to have been primarily triggered by Peter Sutton's 2009 cantankerous tome, *The Politics of Suffering*. Sutton's book had been published in the months leading up to the 2009 annual conference of the Australian Anthropological Society where a session titled '*Crisis of Culture: The Politics of engagement with remote Aboriginal Australia*' provided the first opportunity for anthropologists to respond. This collection of papers from that session was edited by Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson and features some of the key protagonists in the current debates.

Prominent among the antagonists is the only Indigenous voice represented here, Professor Marcia Langton, who takes the opportunity to yet again berate those who oppose the NT Intervention and question the ideas promoted by her and her colleague Noel Pearson. This was to be expected as both Langton and Pearson have stood almost alone in Aboriginal Australia in their strong support for the NT Intervention, and some of their numerous Aboriginal critics have even accused them of being 'architects' of the Intervention. To be fair to Langton, she had mounted a very similar argument in her delivery of the Charles Perkins Memorial Oration in 2002 at University of Sydney, and her position in relation to alcohol abuse and domestic violence in Aboriginal communities is long expressed and well known. However, some argue that she is so determined in her quest to seek urgent solutions to these issues that she sometimes comes close to branding aboriginal people as agents of their own destruction. Furthermore, her strong support of Peter Sutton's condemnation of what both vaguely call the 'Aboriginal rights movement of the 1970s' is slightly perplexing given her significant involvement in, and contribution to, that 'movement'.

It is also important that Anthropologists don't start believing they are Historians. Hence I would suggest the weakness in Langton's arguments about the so-called failure of the 'Aboriginal rights movement' agenda is that she is misrepresenting the history of that era. For anyone with a serious understanding of history to claim that the Aboriginal Land Rights movement's objective and agenda

ever became reality is laughable. Certainly no-one else who was involved in that movement has ever believed that. The fact that Prof. Langton can get away with asserting this is a testament to the broader ignorance of Australian society about the history of that period. But it also creates a credibility problem for those who base their arguments for interventions and repressive policies on the same false interpretation of history. If one of the main premises your central argument is built on is false, then it necessarily calls into question your ultimate conclusions.

Whilst some of the broader arguments put by Langton might be valid, especially in her concern for the victims of alcohol abuse and domestic violence, and the obvious dysfunction in many Aboriginal communities, it is another thing to argue that the best solutions involve prohibition and arbitrary and coercive regimes. Langton in her analysis ignores the implications of the essay in the book by Elizabeth Povinelli, who charts the emergence of neoliberalism and examines the implications of the recent dominance of economic determinants in development of policy. Povinelli suggests that by understanding that what we are dealing with today is a more ruthless form of society dominated by economic analysis of one's worth, we can then better understand how these new values might be challenged and countered. When Langton and Pearson talk of 'failure', then we should ask, 'What are the measures of failure', and 'who defines failure'. By embracing neoliberalism and ideas of free-market economics, they are invariably walking a path toward assimilation. Most Aboriginal people are not opposed to economic development, indeed economic independence was a central policy plank of the 1970s Land Rights movement. But most Aboriginal people do not want economic development that will invariably lead to loss of cultural values and assimilation. Further, an important distinction to make is that the economic development advocated by the 1970s Land Rights movement was predicated upon the idea of community controlled co-operatives, rather than the creation of an artificial, managerial and entrepreneurial elite such as envisaged by Langton's close collaborator Noel Pearson.

This book is a valuable historic document in that it represents a rare moment of introspection for Australian anthropology. Rare indeed, given Australian anthropologists' historical preference for ingratiating themselves with governments and assisting in developing and administering the policies of assimilation that were directly responsible for the 'stolen generations'. When the assimilation golden goose died, the profession of anthropology found a new golden egg in the form of lucrative 'consultancies' in the new 'Native Title Gravy Train'. It is evident to all that the only real

beneficiaries of the vast amounts of money spent on native title claims since 1993 have been members of the legal profession along with their army of anthropologist 'consultants'. Prominent among those 'consultants' has been none other than Professor Langton, which is curious given her strong criticism of such anthropologists in this book.

It all must come as a bit of a shock to Anthropologists to find that after the past three decades where they preferred to avoid politics and chose to not comment on contemporary issues, only to now find themselves now dragged into the spotlight and virtually accused of criminal neglect by a grumpy Peter Sutton. I suspect Anthropologists have only responded this time because the accuser was one of their white own. After all, for 30 years when Aboriginal people mounted similar arguments, the profession did not seem at all perturbed or concerned. So now that their world in is turmoil, this book provides a stimulating insight into some thought-provoking arguments as some very astute minds from all sides of the fence argue it out in a very disciplined and polite manner.

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