

What is at stake in Australia’s “History Wars”

Part 7: Inequality and the development of racial theory

Nick Beams
20 July 2004

Below we are publishing the seventh part in a 10-part series written by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) and member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site. The remaining parts are available at the following links: Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, Part 4, Part 5, Part 6, Part 8, Part 9 and Part 10.

One of the most explosive issues in the History Wars concerns whether the Aborigines were victims of a genocide and, if they were, whether this can be compared, in any way, to the Holocaust inflicted on European Jewry by the Nazis.

Windschuttle begins his *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* by denouncing what he calls the “orthodox” school for introducing the comparison between the colonisation of Australia and the Nazi mass murders.

“While the historians themselves might not have overtly used the Nazi comparison,” he writes, “they have created a picture of widespread mass killings on the frontiers of the pastoral industry that not only went unpunished but had covert government support. They created the intellectual framework and gave it the imprimatur of academic respectability.” [1]

In support of his argument, Windschuttle cites the following passage from *Australia: A Biography of a Nation*, written by expatriate journalist Phillip Knightley: “It remains one of the mysteries of history that Australia was able to get away with a racist policy that included segregation and dispossession and bordered on slavery and genocide, practices unknown in the civilised world in the first half of the twentieth century until Nazi Germany turned on the Jews in the 1930s.” [2]

In order to clarify the issue, let us first examine the connection between the history of colonisation, racial theories and the Nazi genocide. We will then turn to some of the issues raised by Windschuttle’s opponents.

From the outset Windschuttle insists that his aim is not just to clear the colonial authorities of the charge of genocide. He claims to have written “a counter-history of race relations in this country” which finds that “the British colonisation of this continent was the least violent of all Europe’s encounters with the New World.” [3]

Denouncing the “assertions in Phillip Knightley’s book comparing the fate of the Aborigines to the Jews of Europe”, he writes: “As even the narrow focus of this first volume [dealing with the Tasmanian Aborigines] alone is enough to make clear, the Aborigines were *not* the victims of a holocaust. To compare the intentions of Governor Phillip or Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, or any of their successors, to those of Adolf Hitler, is not only conceptually odious but wildly anachronistic.” [4]

The first point to note is that Windschuttle, who insists on adherence to the facts, chooses to ignore the most salient fact of all: that within two generations of colonisation, the entire full-blood Tasmanian Aboriginal population was dead, and a tribal society that had existed for tens of

thousands of years had been completely destroyed. Of course, it is ludicrous to make superficial comparisons between the intentions of the colonial governors and Hitler. Windschuttle has only set up this straw man in the hope that, by doing so, the real historical issues will be ignored.

Intentions and causes

To understand any historical phenomenon, the historian must be concerned, not simply with the intentions of the various historical actors, but with the causes and origins of the events in which these actors played a leading role, and in which their subjective aims and intentions unfolded. These are by no means the same thing. For example, even if it can be demonstrated that it was, indeed, Hitler’s intention, at least from the time he wrote *Mein Kampf*—where he noted that the Jews should have suffered the gas of the World War I trenches—to wipe out European Jewry, that still does not explain the Holocaust. Intentions are one thing, the possibility of realising them another. Even if one begins with what is known as the “intentionalist” view of the Holocaust, the question still has to be answered: how could such an individual become leader of the second-most powerful industrial capitalist nation in the world? How could he set in motion a vast bureaucratic structure to carry out his murderous plans?

By the same token, it is completely false to argue, as Windschuttle does, that just because Arthur had no *intention* of wiping out the Aboriginal population—and there is clear evidence that this was not his aim—then the colonial regime he headed can somehow be absolved and the Aborigines themselves made responsible for their own extermination.

The intentions of Governor Arthur and Adolf Hitler were, of course, profoundly different, shaped by vastly different historical circumstances. But the different intentions notwithstanding, there is an underlying connection. Arthur headed a regime engaged in a colonising process, the logic of which involved forcing the indigenous population off the land, leading to its extermination. The liquidation of European Jewry—the Final Solution—took place as part of an attempted colonisation of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, to which Hitler referred as “our India.”

This is not simply an external similarity. Rather, as we shall see, it points to the deep-going historical connection between the colonisation practised by the European powers in the nineteenth, and first half of the twentieth, century and the Nazi Holocaust. Again, this is not to equate the two processes. Those who do so commit a grave disservice, both to the search for historical truth and to the cause of the Aboriginal people whom they claim to defend.

Knightley’s assertion, which Windschuttle eagerly seizes upon, is a case in point. His claim that the racist practices and policies carried out in Australia, that “bordered on slavery and genocide” were “unknown in the civilised world in the first half of the twentieth century” displays an extreme narrowness of vision, to say the least. Far from being alien to civilisation, such practices formed the very basis of the colonialism of the

British Empire and the other major European powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The “shock” of the Nazi program derived not least from the fact that it represented the extension into “civilised” Europe of the kind of measures regularly carried out by the European powers against their colonial subjects over the previous 150 years and more.

Windschuttle, in examining the extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines, claims that his “orthodox” opponents have failed to address the influence of Enlightenment thinking—with its emphasis on the unity of the human race—and the Evangelical revival within the Church of England in the late eighteenth century. While “a demand from some settlers for the extermination of the Aborigines would not have been surprising” by 1830, he writes, such a demand, on the other hand, “would not only have meant denying them the status of human beings protected by His Majesty’s laws, but would have also gone against the predominant religious and philosophical beliefs of the time, both at home and abroad.” [5]

According to Windschuttle, the prevailing ideas about race relations “were anything but antagonistic to the natives.” The “orthodox” historians, he continues, “make no attempt to think themselves into the minds of their subjects,” instead attributing to them views on race that did not emerge until the twentieth century. Had any of these authors actually attempted to understand the mentality of the British Empire in the early nineteenth century then “they might have seen that, if the settlers had been the exterminators they portray, then they would have had to disavow the ascendant spirit of the age.” The settlers would have had to “reject the dominant assumptions of their political and religious authorities, or else have been reluctantly driven to their position by force of circumstances.” [6]

In the first period of colonisation, as Windschuttle notes, the settlers generally regarded the Aborigines as “a mild and peaceful people” and “the most peaceable creatures in the universe”. [7]

That attitude, however, began to undergo a dramatic change as circumstances themselves changed. In particular, the relentless expansion of the pastoral industry, supplying the British and European markets with wool, pushed colonial settlement and land appropriation deeper and deeper into the hunting grounds of the Aboriginal tribes. It is certainly true that, when discussing the “extermination” of the Aboriginal population, the settlers did so on the grounds that there was “no alternative.” But that does not lend support to Windschuttle’s claims about the power of Enlightenment ideals and the teachings of the Evangelical Church. Rather, it demonstrates that there were far more powerful—material—forces at work and that the Aboriginal extermination arose out of the objective logic of colonial expansion.

A selection of statements by settlers at the time demonstrates that extermination was a matter of public discussion. According to William Barnes, a justice of the peace, landowner and brewer, if the conflict did not cease “then the dreadful alternative only remains of a general extermination by some means or other.” Rural landowner George Espie told a government inquiry that the land had to belong either to Black or White and he could see “no other remedy but their speedy capture or extermination.” Temple Pearson, another settler, shared the same view, arguing that “total extermination, however severe measure, I much fear will be the only means left to the government to protect the Whites.” Edward Curr, director of the Van Diemen’s Land Company, believed that the conflict would end “as all such matters have ended in other parts of the world, by the extermination of the weaker race.” The editor of the *Tasmanian* declared that, since the Aborigines were determined to destroy all before them, “extermination seems to be the only remedy.” [8]

The origin of racial theory

Windschuttle’s insistence that the settlers’ adherence to Enlightenment ideals precluded extermination ignores the very important ideological transformation that began in the late eighteenth, and early nineteenth, century. It was to lead, ultimately, to the “scientific” theories of racial

inferiority that became such a crucial ingredient of the Nazi Holocaust.

A fundamental contradiction runs through the development of modern capitalist society over the past two hundred years. It is the contradiction between the ruling ideology of bourgeois society—based on the doctrines of liberty, equality and the universal nature of the human race—and the history of oppression and colonial domination, buttressed by racialist theories, which have led to the greatest level of social inequality ever seen in human history.

The post-modernists seek to wipe this contradiction out by insisting that the doctrines of the Enlightenment, with their emphasis on universal laws, were Euro-centric, thus forming the basis of colonialism and racial theories. In their jaundiced view, they echo the earlier positions of Horkheimer and Adorno, two of the leading lights of the Frankfurt School. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the dialectic of Enlightenment led inevitably to the gates of Auschwitz.

In reality, the racial doctrines that culminated under the Nazis arose not out of Enlightenment philosophy, but rather from attempts to explain and rationalise the continued existence of social inequality—in spite of the ideological commitment to equality.

The rising capitalist class developed the Enlightenment ideology in its struggle against feudalism and the absolutist regimes, where social inequality was enforced by birth, caste and privilege. But capitalist society, based on private ownership, the free market and equality before the law, rapidly created new inequities. It was the persistence and growth of these inequities that gave rise to various racial theories. They helped provide a “natural” explanation—and thus a justification—for continuing social inequality under the capitalist system.

The fact that the market economy itself generated social inequality was widely recognised at that time. One only has to turn, for example, to the writings of its greatest advocate, the founder of modern political economy, Adam Smith. “Wherever there is great property,” he wrote in *The Wealth of Nations*, “there is great inequality. For every one rich man there must be at least five hundred poor, and the affluence of the few supposes indigence of the many.” Smith recognised that this inequality was not a product of nature, but of society. “In reality, the difference of natural talents in different men is perhaps much less than we are aware of, and the very genius which appears to distinguish men of different professions grown up to maturity, is not, perhaps, so much the cause as the effect of the division of labour.”

Smith was well aware that the new social inequality required a system of government to enforce the protection of property. “The affluence of the rich,” he explained, “excites the indignation of the poor who are both driven by want and prompted by envy, to invade their possessions. It is only under the shelter of the civil magistrate that the owner of valuable property, which is acquired by the labour of many years, or perhaps of many successive generations, can sleep at night in security. ... The acquisition of valuable and extensive property, therefore, necessarily requires the establishment of civil government.” [9]

Hegel, who made a detailed study of the developing market economy in England, likewise noted that the production of great wealth at one pole necessarily produced great poverty at the other.

On the one hand the rising productivity of labour, based on great advances in technology and production under the capitalist mode of production, allowed substantial progress to be made in eliminating inequality. On the other, however, as capitalist economy advanced, it produced the greatest inequalities—both within and between nations—ever seen in human history.

Previously, social inequalities had been ascribed to God’s design. But in the nineteenth century, the justifications began to assume a more “scientific” character. They were put down to the existence of different “races”. This emerging racial theory, in turn, claimed to be grounded in the scientific methods developed in the Enlightenment.

The class basis of racial theory can be seen most clearly in its origins. It was developed not so much as a justification for colonialism, but to provide a biological explanation for the persistence of social inequality in the developing capitalist economies of Western Europe. The emerging working classes, born of capitalist industry itself, were designated a different, and necessarily inferior, race—a lower form of humanity, just as the peoples of the colonies were to become. Moreover, as capitalist industry spread, these classes were to become ever more numerous, threatening the prevailing social order. That is why, in the nineteenth century, the question of race was always bound up with the “social question”.

As the writer Enzo Traverso points out: “‘Race’ was used as a metaphor to designate a class that was feared, a class whose threatening otherness was apprehended in biological, physical, psychological, and moral terms, the better to set it at a distance and if necessary to crush it. The designation of the labouring classes as an ‘inferior race’ became a commonplace of European culture in the age of triumphant industrial capitalism. Around the mid-nineteenth century, the English essayist Henry Mayhew described the poor of large towns as ‘wandering tribes in the midst of civilised society’, tribes with all the characteristics of primitive peoples. They were recognisable both from their physical appearance, with their ‘high cheekbones and jutting jaws’, and from the way they spoke their incomprehensible jargon.” [10]

The mass murder that accompanied the overthrow of the Paris Commune in June 1871 was justified as a necessary cleansing action, to rid society of an invasion by wild beasts.

“In all major towns,” Theophile Gautier wrote in an article published in October of that year, “there are lion-pits, heavily barred caverns. Designed to contained wild beasts, stinking animals, venomous creatures, all the refractory perversities that civilisation has been unable to tame, those who love blood, those who are amused by arson as fireworks, those for whom theft is a delight, those for whom rape represents love, all those with the hearts of monsters, all those with deformed souls; a disgusting population, unknown in the light of day pullulating in sinister fashion in the depths of subterranean darkness. One day it happens that a careless jailer leaves his keys in the doors of this menagerie, and the wild beasts rampage with savage roars through the horrified town. Out of the open cages leap the hyenas of ‘93 and the gorillas of the Commune.” [11]

Racial theory and the “spread of civilisation”

By the middle of the nineteenth century, if not before, the Enlightenment outlook had been superseded. Doctrines that had emphasised the essential homogeneity and unity of mankind, despite superficial differences, were replaced by a “racial science,” which insisted on an essential heterogeneity, grounded in biology. Some races were destined to progress, others were incapable of further advance and therefore destined to give way to superior races or die out. In the new cultural climate, colonialism, progress, the march of civilisation, the right of conquest of “inferior” races—and even their extermination—were regarded as part of the same process. Race and progress were bound together, and rooted in biology. The various races were different stages in the development of man, with the white races at the head of the chain, followed by the yellow and brown, with the black Africans at the end. The spread of progress and civilisation necessarily involved the extermination of the lesser races.

As Traverso recounts, the London Anthropological Society made the “extinction of inferior races” the theme of a discussion in 1864. Speaking on the New Zealand experience, Dr Richard Lee commented on “the rapid disappearance of aboriginal tribes” in the face of the advance of civilisation. Diseases were a factor but there were deeper reasons. “We must regard it as an illustration of the crudest forms of humanity, with certain groups shrinking and passing away before others that are enlightened with intelligence and endowed with intellectual superiority.”

[12]

Alfred Russel Wallace insisted that the inevitable consequence of the natural laws that preserved the “favoured races” in the “struggle for life” led just as inevitably to “the extinction of all those low and mentally undeveloped populations with which Europeans came into contact.” This explained the disappearance of the indigenous populations of North America, Brazil, and Australasia.

“The intellectual and moral, as well as the physical, qualities of the Europeans are superior, the same powers and capacities—which have made him rise in a few centuries from the condition of a wandering savage, with a scanty and stationary population, to his present stage of culture and advancement, with a greater average longevity, a greater average strength, and a capacity of more rapid increase,—enable him, when in contact with the savage man, to conquer in the struggle for existence, and to increase at his expense, just as the better adapted increase at the expense of the less adapted varieties in the animal and vegetable kingdoms,—just as the weeds of Europe overrun North America and Australia, extinguishing native productions by the inherent vigour of their organisation, and by their greater capacity for existence and multiplication.”

The outlook was the same in French scientific circles. According to Edmond Perrier, writing in 1888: “Human races owe their spread on earth to their superiority. Just as animals disappear before the advance of man, this privileged being, so too the savage is wiped out before the European, before civilisation ever takes hold of him. However regrettable this may be from a moral point of view, civilisation seems to have spread throughout the world far more by dint of destroying the barbarians than by subjecting them to its laws.”

In 1909, E. Caillot wrote: “When a people has remained stationary for so long, all hope of seeing it advance must be abandoned. It is bound to be classified among the inferior nations and, like these, is condemned to die out or be absorbed by a superior race ... That is the implacable law of nature against which nothing can prevail, as has repeatedly been established by history: the stronger devours the weaker. The Polynesian race did not manage to scale the rungs of the ladder of progress, it has added not the slightest contribution to the efforts that humanity has made to improve its lot. It must therefore make way before others that are more worthy, and disappear. Its death will be no loss to civilisation.” [13]

Notes:

- 1) Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, p. 2
- 2) *ibid*
- 3) *op cit*, p. 3
- 4) *op cit*, p. 9
- 5) *op cit*, p. 297
- 6) *op cit*, pp. 297, 300-301
- 7) Windschuttle, “Whitewash confirms the fabrication of Aboriginal history”, *Quadrant*, October 2003
- 8) cited in Henry Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain?* pp. 52-53
- 9) cited in Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race*, pp. 59-60
- 10) Enzo Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence*, p. 109
- 11) cited in Traverso, *op cit*, pp. 111-112
- 12) Traverso, *op cit*, p. 55
- 13) cited in Traverso *op cit* pp. 55-59

See Also:

What is at stake in Australia's "History Wars"

Part 6: Keating versus Howard

[19 July 2004]

What is at stake in Australia's "History Wars" *Part 5: John Howard and "the Australian way of life"*

[16 July 2004]

What is at stake in Australia's "History Wars"

Part 4: From "White Australia" to Geoffrey Blainey

[15 July 2004]

What is at stake in Australia's "History Wars"

Part 3: The doctrine of "White Australia"

[14 July 2004]

What is at stake in Australia's "History Wars"

Part 2: The establishment of the Australian nation-state

[13 July 2004]

What is at stake in Australia's "History Wars"

Part 1: Competing political agendas

[12 July 2004]



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact