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

Part 9: Windschuttle's liberal critics

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22 July 2004

Below we are publishing the ninth 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 7, Part 8 *and* Part 10.

In their contribution to *Whitewash*—a compilation of replies to Windschuttle's book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*—Martin Krygier and Robert van Krieken begin by agreeing with Windschuttle that "the debate over Aboriginal history goes far beyond its ostensible subject" and that it is "about the character of the nation and, ultimately, the calibre of the civilisation Britain brought to these shores in 1788." [1]

Expanding on this theme, the two authors continue: "Most of us *care* deeply about both the character of the nation to which we belong and the calibre of the civilisation we embody. It is because we care that discussions of Aboriginal history under settler-colonialism have evoked the attention, not to mention the passions, sometimes hatreds, often pain, which they have in this country. The historical understanding of issues like frontier violence is never going to be detached, because history lies at the heart of identity." [2]

This position is representative of what could be termed the liberal opposition to the extreme right-wing agenda advanced by Windschuttle, and by his supporters in the mass media. Looking to extol the positive features of Australian society, Krygier and van Krieken maintain that the "shameful" parts of Australian history must first be publicly acknowledged.

According to them, Windschuttle is not simply out to overturn the contemporary approach to Aboriginal history, which comprehensively reviews the massacres that accompanied colonial settlement. Within the larger book, they allege, exists a "slimmer volume" that deals with "the calibre of the nation" and of British civilisation. It is this "subtext that provides the motivation, rationale, the indefatigable energy and spine of the larger work." [3]

This is undoubtedly true. Windschuttle's book is not so much history as raw ideology, written as a defence of the prevailing economic and social order—a fact recognised instinctively by many of those right-wing media commentators who have taken up a strident defence of both the author and his work.

Windschuttle begins his analysis of frontier violence by constructing a myth: that the so-called "orthodox historians" have equated colonial settlement with Nazi violence. Once he has established it "the contrary position generates itself on automatic pilot" with the counter-myth forming the basis of Windschuttle's arguments. Certainly, as Krygier and van Krieken point out, Windschuttle acknowledges that white settlement led to black violence. But he argues that this was not the product of a sense of resentment on the part of the Aborigines. Rather, to use Windschuttle's own words, European settlement "gave the Aborigines more opportunity and more temptation to engage in robbery and murder, two customs they had come to relish." [4]

Krygier and van Krieken begin their critique of Windschuttle by drawing attention to issues raised by the historian (and later Liberal politician) Paul Hasluck, whose 1942 book *Black Australians* is favourably cited by Windschuttle. According to Hasluck: "The policy of direct action [Hasluck's euphemism for killings and violence—NB] on the frontier did not come from any peculiar viciousness in individuals, it arose out of the nature of contact. Men who if they had been in England on those days or in an armchair in the present day would probably have abhorred the shooting down of natives, were brought by fear, rivalry and exasperation to kill men or to condone the killing by others. It was recognised as a means of establishing order and peace." [5]

The basis of Hasluck's argument, according to Krygier and van Krieken, was that "one should see frontier violence as a product of a particular situation or structural context rather than of character flaws, without denying the reality and damaging effects of that violence." It was necessary to "investigate what it was about the frontier situation that led apparently civilised people to behave in barbaric ways." [6]

This is true ... as far as it goes. But it raises a number of questions that Krygier and van Krieken hardly consider, much less begin to seriously investigate. For example, what was it about the "structural context" of the frontier that gave rise to such violence? Why did it place men in a situation where they committed atrocities that, in other circumstances, would have been regarded as totally abhorrent? And, perhaps even more importantly, what has happened to the "structures" which produced that violence? Have they been superseded and overcome, rooted out and destroyed, or do they underpin today's society—which was built on the destruction of Aboriginal society? And if they *have* been overturned, how is it that a work such as Windschuttle's, which is so clearly aimed at justifying the mass murder of the indigenous population, should receive such support from powerful interests within present-day society?

In discussing the settlers' motives, Krygier and van Krieken again point to critical questions, insisting that the historian's task is not to demonise the settlers, put them on trial and find them guilty.

"We're not a court, still less a kangaroo court," they write. "Some people do bad, thinking it good. Others do good, but with terrible consequences. Many sad results were not intended, and few people who did evil thought that was what they did. People rarely do, but what does that tell us? Lots of otherwise decent people do indecent things, because they believe what everybody else believes or do what everybody else does. And what everyone believes is rarely anyone's specific intention. To understand systemic historic injustices, individual motives are rarely decisive. They don't explain patterned and structured behaviours, and that

is what later generations typically need to understand." [7]

This is well put. But having laid out the necessity for a materialist understanding of the historical process, by delving into what Frederick Engels called "the motives behind the motives," Krygier and van Krieken immediately turn on to another path, as if fearful of pursuing to their conclusion, the questions they, themselves, have opened up.

"We are members of a nation," they write, "seeking to come to terms with what our inherited culture made available and our forebears did. Of course, interpretation of the past must exhibit tact and humility, depends on thoughtful, sensitive appraisal of the facts, and should avoid simple all-purpose characterisations of complex matters. And morality is not the only relevant register. Tragedy was almost certainly written into our national history as soon as whites decided to come here, and whatever we did. Nevertheless we did come here and we did some things and not others. We must come to terms with what we did." [8]

But, as the two writers have already pointed out, such an approach obscures the essential questions. The real task is not to "come to terms with what we did" but to show how it was that the very structure of colonial-capitalist society led to the devastation of the Aboriginal population. And if that devastation continues, as it clearly does—albeit in other forms—then the structures of present-day society must also be probed.

Where responsibility lies

Maintaining that "we" somehow bear a responsibility for the past is part of a definite political outlook. This is well illustrated in Keating's now famous Redfern Park speech, delivered on December 10, 1992, to launch the Year of the World's Indigenous People.

The starting point for overcoming the problems besetting the "first Australians", Keating declared, was an "act of recognition." "Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional land and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us."

Keating's speech encapsulates the classic liberal response to the destruction of Aboriginal society: recognition, on the one hand, that terrible crimes were committed, while, on the other, avoidance of any concrete examination of where real responsibility actually lies. It is simply a matter of "our" "failure of imagination".

The political content of Keating's speech can be thrown into relief by allowing ourselves to imagine a very different one. Rather than insisting "we" were to blame, consider the impact of a speech which explained that the murder, dispossession, rape, poisonings and other terrible tragedies that befell the Aboriginal people were the inevitable outcome of the introduction of a social order based on private ownership— starting with the exclusive, private, ownership of land. Such an approach would bring to light the real—that is, the essential—history of Aboriginal dispossession and its relationship to the global spread of the capitalist mode of production. It would demonstrate that a mode of production accompanied by such violence at its birth would act with equal ruthlessness to maintain its existence. It would make clear that while the perpetrators of the violence in colonial times had long since passed away, the economic system that gave rise to those crimes still continues—and will be responsible for even greater crimes in the future. It would establish a profound connection between the dispossession of the Aboriginal people and all the social ills afflicting today's society—the wars of conquest, renewed colonial oppression, attacks on living standards, the systematic impoverishment of millions—as well as the continued oppression of Australia's Aboriginal population.

This, the liberal critics cannot do—even though they acknowledge that "structural" factors are at work. To examine Aboriginal dispossession in these terms would oblige them to start to question the very social relations of capitalism on which they rest, and whose continuation they support. At the same time they feel the need to acknowledge the crimes of the past. Hence the modus operandi employed by Keating— acknowledgement of the tragedies while obscuring the essential historical, and contemporary, political issues that they raise.

Aboriginal society and the "rule of law"

Krygier and van Krieken return to the structural foundation of Aboriginal dispossession in their discussion of the "rule of law" that accompanied colonial settlement. Windschuttle, they point out, considers that it is enough to cite the colonial governors' commitment to the rule of law to assume that Aborigines were safeguarded by it.

But even when they disposed of that fiction, troubling issues remain. "Most unsettling for ardent adherents to the rule of law, among them ourselves, is that it is hard to see how a will more concerned to bring the rule of law could have done much to alter the tragedy that became the Aboriginal story in our country. Indeed, in the context of early colonialism, and even more in the light of the relative impotence of the imposed law for much of the century, talk of the rule of law could serve to justify, mythologise and may well have blinded the perpetrators to the horror of relationships of domination and exploitation out of which, systematically and unavoidably, there could only be one set of winners. Again, this is a systemic problem, not necessarily a problem of anyone's will." [9]

Here again, Krygier and van Krieken stop right at the point where the analysis needs to begin. What was it about the law that would have signified—even if there had been a concerted will to ensure its application—a continuation of the horrors of domination and exploitation of the indigenous population? The answer is to be found in the nature of the law itself. The rule of law meant the establishment of capitalist property relations and the sweeping away of the existing pre-capitalist society. The Aborigines did not have private ownership of land, and they found it completely unnatural to be excluded from its use. Colonial society, however, was based on different foundations—private ownership of land, which meant the exclusion of others from its use.

The destruction of Aboriginal society did not take place in *contradiction* to the rule of law, but arose out of its very *application*. It was in the collision of the colonial-settler society with the Aborigines' hunter-gatherer society that the inherent logic of the new social relations was revealed. The expropriation of land as private, that is, exclusive, property was bound up with the extension of pastoral industry. Those who stood in its way had to be cleared away like the trees or wild animals.

This fact is the source of the extreme contemporary sensitivity to accounts of the history of Aboriginal extermination.

The controversy is not about "guilt" or "saying sorry" or "reconciliation". It arises because recognition of what actually took place leads organically to questions about the economic and social system that gave rise to it—not only in the past but today as well. That is why the most vociferous supporters of Windschuttle are to be found among the strongest advocates of the "free market." They sense, rightly, that in defending the colonial-settler society of the past they are defending the present social order.

A global process

The violent dispossession of the Aboriginal people which formed the foundation of colonial-settler society and ultimately the Australian nation-state—is deeply troubling for liberals, like Krygier and van Krieken, who seek to construct a more progressive form of national culture and identity.

In his Boyer lectures of 1997, Krygier wrote: "If we feel no pride in our country, and have done nothing wrong ourselves, we might feel untouched by the wrongs committed by our forebears and compatriots. But that level of rootless indifference is uncommon. If we feel any pride in our country for anything we did not do personally—as do all those who cheer an Australian Ashes victory or feel proud of the many beauties and

gentlenesses of ordinary Australian life or, like me, know that they're lucky to be here—then how can we possibly evade shame when our country's history has shameful elements? Pride and shame go together: both or neither. Anyone who claims the former must be prepared to shoulder the latter as well." [10]

The fundamental question raised by Krygier is: how do we assess the historical process? How is it possible to speak of "progress" when history contains terrible tragedies, including the dispossession and extermination of whole peoples? In answering it, Krygier bases himself on the nation-state. Can "we" as Australians, he asks, be proud of "our" history unless we acknowledge a sense of shame over the wrongs and crimes committed in the past?

Herein lies the basic methodological flaw. Krygier takes the nation-state as an unalterable given, from which the historical process must be examined. But the nation-state itself is a product of historical development, which at one point brought it into being, at another has rendered it completely anachronistic, destined to take its place alongside earlier social forms. Thus the nation-state cannot form the basis of an assessment of the historical process. Rather, the evolution of the nation-state must itself be examined on the basis of an investigation of the real driving force of history—the growth and development of the productive forces.

It is sickening to recall the destruction of Aboriginal society and the terrible crimes associated with it. But in assessing these events, we must understand the social and historical processes from which they arose—above all, the expansion of British industry and the spread of the capitalist mode of production all over the world. Marx's remarks on the destruction of Indian society are particularly relevant.

"The devastating effects of English industry, when contemplated with regard to India, a country as vast as Europe, and containing 150 millions of acres, are palpable and confounding," he wrote. "But we must not forget that they are only the organic results of the whole system of production as it is now constituted. That production rests on the supreme rule of capital. The centralisation of capital is essential to the existence of capital as an independent power. The destructive influence of that centralisation upon the markets of world does but reveal, in the most gigantic dimensions, the inherent organic laws of political economy now at work in every civilised town. The bourgeois period of history has to create the material basis of the new world—on the one hand the universal intercourse founded upon the mutual dependency of mankind, and the means of that intercourse; on the other hand the development of the productive powers of man and the transformation of material production into a scientific domination of natural agencies. Bourgeois industry and commerce create these material conditions of a new world in the same way as geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth. When a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to common control of the most advanced peoples, then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink nectar but from the skulls of the slain." [11]

The colonisation and development of Australia was part of a global process—the expansion of the capitalist mode of production and the destruction, over the course of two centuries, of all previous modes of social production. Australian history can only be assessed within this international context. The expansion of capitalism on a global scale was historically progressive, even though the nation-states it created—and most were by no means prosperous—were forged out of the most terrible acts of violence and oppression.

As Rosa Luxemburg put it: "The intrusion of European civilisation was a disaster in every sense for primitive social relations. The European conquerors are the first who are not merely after subjugation and economic exploitation, but the means of production itself, by ripping the land from underneath the feet of the native population. In this way, European capitalism deprives the primitive social order of its foundation. What emerges is something that is worse than all oppression and exploitation, total anarchy and a specifically European phenomenon, the uncertainty of social existence. The subjugated peoples, separated from their means of production, are regarded by European capitalism as mere labourers, and when they are useful for this end, they are made into slaves, and if they are not, they are exterminated." [12]

To be continued

Notes:

1) Martin Krygier and Robert van Krieken, "The Character of the Nation" in *Whitewash*, Robert Manne ed., p. 82
2) ibid
3) op cit, p 83
4) op cit, p. 85
5) op cit p. 87
6) op cit, pp. 87-88
7) op cit, p. 99
8) op cit, p. 100
9) op cit, p. 103
10) Martin Krygier, *Pride, Shame and Decency*, Fourth Boyer Lecture November 30, 1997
11) Marx, *The Future Results of British Rule in India*, in Marx and Engels, Selected Works Volume 1, pp. 498-499
12 Rosa Luxemburg, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, Monthly Review Press, New York 2004, p 110