

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

Part 10: Private property, the nation state and socialism

Nick Beams
23 July 2004

Below we are publishing the final 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 7, Part 8 and Part 9.

The historically progressive nature of capitalism, as an epoch in human history, derives, not from the creation of nation-states, but from its two most fundamental features. In the first place, capitalism is the first truly universal mode of production. This universality emerges from the unceasing drive of capital, in the process of accumulation, to overcome all barriers to its expansion—whether geographical or social—and extend its sway across the globe. In doing so, it creates the conditions, for the first time in history, for the genuine unification of the human race. Moreover, it creates a universal social class whose objective historical task is to realise this goal. The social interests of the international working class become ever more clearly defined, not by its relationship to this or that national section of capital, but by its relationship with, and struggle against, the global capitalist system as a whole.

Secondly, in its constant striving to increase the productivity of labour—a striving emanating from its own objective laws—the capitalist mode of production creates the material preconditions for the emancipation of the whole of mankind. There can be no real human liberation, Marx explained, unless the productivity of labour is so high that the majority of the population is no longer forced to spend most of its time trying to secure its means of subsistence. The enormous developments in productive technique under capitalism have made emancipation from want entirely realisable. But this requires nothing less than the complete reorganisation of social relations—the abolition of both the private ownership of the means of production and the nation-state system.

The colonisation and capitalist development of Australia was progressive, not because it created a better society, or because it saw the establishment of democracy and the rule of law, but because it was part of this universal process.

And, contrary to the claims of the fathers of federation, Australian nationalism was not progressive. By the end of the nineteenth century, nationalist ideology was no longer based on the call for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" that had animated the American Revolution, or the Declaration of the Rights of Man resulting from the French Revolution. Nationalism, which had been *inclusive* in the eighteenth century—above all, a political category embracing the people against the nobility—now became *exclusive*, as members of the nation were defined in terms of race and ethnicity. The very development of capitalism had brought about this shift. On the one hand, the rising bourgeoisie sought the development of a unified national market. On the other, it could not establish the nation through appeals to democracy, equality and justice

because such appeals would endanger its own position under conditions of deepening class divisions.

The new nationalism

The federation of Australia is a case in point. The White Australia policy—exclusivism—lay at the very foundation of the new nation. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) adopted, as one of its objectives, the "cultivation of an Australian sentiment based on the maintenance of racial purity and the development in Australia of an enlightened self-reliant community."

Also grounded in exclusivism was the removal of "half-caste" Aboriginal children from their mothers—a policy that began in the early 1900s and continued through to the end of the 1960s. It was necessary to "breed out the colour" in order to ensure a unified nation. Likewise the policy of so-called "assimilation", to which Aborigines and immigrants had to adapt themselves in order to be "Australian," was based on the assumption that an established national identity existed.

The White Australia policy collapsed, however, under the pressures created by rising anti-colonial struggles and the processes of economic globalisation. Its demise provoked attempts to establish a new form of national identity, based on recognition of the crimes committed against the indigenous population, and the "diversity" embodied in so-called "multiculturalism".

While portrayed as a "progressive" response to present-day social problems, the search for a new multicultural national identity is backward-looking and, in the deepest sense of the word, reactionary. The old nationalist ideology has broken down. But instead of recognising that its demise has deep-going objective causes, the proponents of the new national identity seek to reconstruct nationalism on different foundations.

Despite the claims of its adherents that the new nationalism, based on multiculturalism, will be inclusive and tolerant of differences, as opposed to the exclusive and racist White Australia nationalism, it is, in essence, just as reactionary as the old. Multiculturalism aims to identify and acknowledge differences. But nationalism demands homogeneity: there are those who belong to the nation, as opposed to those who do not. The former are included, the latter excluded.

This becomes apparent when one examines refugee and immigration policy. All manner of liberals condemn Prime Minister Howard for his refusal to support Aboriginal reconciliation and offer an official apology to the "stolen generations", as well as for his incarceration of refugees in concentration camps—a policy initiated and supported by the Labor Party.

These, however, are issues that have arisen in every major capitalist country. Governments everywhere are undertaking ever more repressive measures against refugees and so-called "illegal immigrants". To come to grips with why, we must examine the objective roots of this phenomenon.

The vast movement of the world's peoples—those seeking refugee status,

as well as those emigrating to advance their standard of living—is a product of the turbulence and disruption—economic, social and political—associated with economic globalisation. The problem of so-called “illegal immigration” is one expression of the profound contradiction between the global expansion of production and the old nation-state system. While the free market and the drive for profit dictate that capital be free of any restrictions, the movement of people is constricted by the laws and regulations of the national state.

The proponents of the new, more inclusive, non-racist nationalism—no less than the advocates of the White Australia policy—support these restrictions, insisting that the national state must have the power to decide who is admitted and who can stay within its borders. And, at a certain point, these laws and regulations are imposed through the use of force.

In other words, once the nation-state is accepted as the foundation of political and social relations, then border regulation, ultimately through the use of force—the mandatory detention of “illegals,” for example—inevitably follows.

Upholding the rights and freedoms of the individual—claimed by liberals as central to their philosophy—is only possible if one affirms the right of any person to live, study and work wherever in the world they choose. But this comes into conflict with the nation-state—which is why it has become such a controversial political issue. Just as the feudal states and principalities became a barrier to a higher form of social organisation—and were thus overturned, to make way for it—so today the nation-state framework has become an obstacle to human freedom. It, too, must be overturned, to enable the development of a new form of global social organisation.

Private property

The liberals’s attitude is no less backward-looking on the question of property. Central to the new nationalism is the perspective of “reconciliation” with the Aboriginal population, based on acknowledgement of past crimes and the establishment of “native title” or indigenous property rights.

In his contribution to *Whitewash*, historian Henry Reynolds insists that Windschuttle wants to “bring the concept of *terra nullius* back to life.” “He tells us that the notions of the exclusive possession of territory and the defence of it either by law or force ‘were not part of the Aborigines’ mental universe’. In short the Tasmanians ‘did not own the land’. The concept of property was ‘not part of their culture.’” [1]

According to Windschuttle, this means that the European settlers were not taking land which belonged to somebody else. So Aboriginal attacks on the settlers had nothing to do with encroachments on their land—they had no sense of trespass—but flowed from baser motives.

Reynolds is easily able to show that the Tasmanian Aboriginal tribes lived within defined regions and had words for “my country” and “our country”. This, he insists, refutes Windschuttle’s assertion that they had no concept of property.

This is a false argument. The Aborigines did not have a concept of private property, that is, a particular set of social relationships in which individuals or even groups—the private owners of the land—were able to exclude others from its use. Nor, in fact, did the majority of humanity for most of its history. Private ownership of land, and the right to exclude others from its use, is a product of capitalist development. In Europe, it used to be held that land was bestowed by God, and therefore available to all. It took considerable intellectual labour by John Locke and others to establish the right to exclusive, private, property.

Private property in land is not a product of nature, but of history and it will pass into history. As Marx explained: “From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation, the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men.” [2]

Property rights continually change. In Locke’s day it was considered

that land was given to all. Nearer our own time, the discoveries of science—being the outcome of the collective work of scientists over generations—were considered freely available to all. Now, however, we have the concept of “intellectual property rights” and even the conception that the structure of our own DNA can be patented and made an exclusive property right. These concepts, which have their origin in the insatiable drive of capital to penetrate everywhere—the same drive which, in an earlier period, led to the colonisation of Australia—are regarded by many as thoroughly alien, just as the concept of private exclusive property in land appeared completely alien to earlier generations.

The Tasmanian Aborigines fought against the colonial settlement not out of a sense of property, but because the exclusive private ownership of land—sanctified by the rule of law—was tantamount to a death sentence. It prevented, not their ownership of the land, but its use.

Accepting Windschuttle’s assertion that the Tasmanian Aborigines had no concept of property is not a concession to his overall argument. Why, then, does Reynolds cling so tenaciously to the argument that they did have such a concept? Why does he argue that to say anything else is to accept the *terra nullius* claim? Above all, because it is bound up with a definite political agenda.

For the liberals, the Mabo decision of 1992, which recognised native title, signified the wiping out of the concept of *terra nullius*, at least insofar as far as property was concerned. They regard it as the basis for advancing the interests of the indigenous population. Historical justice, they argue, requires the recognition of prior ownership, in the form of native title, which will eventually lead to some kind of restitution for past crimes.

To claim that when the High Court bestowed native title it somehow enhanced the cause of the Aboriginal people is to obscure the nature of the struggle they confront. The Aboriginal people will never advance through the creation of another capitalist property form, based on the very legal principles and doctrines that provided the framework for their dispossession in the first place. Rather, they can only go forward to the extent that capitalist property in the land and means of production is abolished.

This is not simply a matter of logic, but of historical experience. If capital came into the world “dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt,” five hundred years of capitalist development—including two centuries of Australian settlement—are sufficient to demonstrate that it is organically incapable of securing justice for the indigenous peoples upon whose death and dispossession it rests. [3]

The deep-seated problems confronting the Aboriginal population cannot be resolved by the creation of new capitalist property forms. On the contrary, to even start to address them requires deep inroads into capitalist property. In other words, ending the oppression of the Aboriginal people is a task that falls to the socialist revolution. Included within its ambit are all the historical problems bequeathed by capitalism.

Windschuttle and the “free market”

At the conclusion of his *Whitewash* contribution, Henry Reynolds poses the question: “How do we explain the animus [of Windschuttle] towards the Tasmanians? Whence comes the passion?”

According to Reynolds, if the object is to “undermine all those staples of contemporary Aboriginal politics—land rights, self-determination, reparation, even the need for a prime ministerial apology—then the necessary and logical path is the one opened up by Windschuttle that leads to the interrelated concepts of savagery and *terra nullius*. If the desire is to forestall the emergence of Aboriginal nationalism, then the way to do it is to rob indigenous communities of anything in their past that might nurture pride and self-confidence.” [4]

But even if that were Windschuttle’s motivation, how is one to explain the “bevy of right wing identities” that has followed him? Their support

for his arguments is not simply so that they can once more “feel relaxed and comfortable about their history” as Reynolds asserts.

In his introduction to *Whitewash*, editor Robert Manne likewise points to Howard’s desire to make Australians comfortable about the past “whose most unsettling dimension was ... the destruction of Aboriginal society.” He also points to a “counter-revolution in the sensibility concerning the dispossession of the Aborigines” no less than the revolution in thinking that began in the late 1960s.

But, again, what has caused this turnaround? Manne finds it alarming that in their reception of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* “so many prominent Australian conservatives have been so easily misled by so ignorant, so polemical and so pitiless a book” and concludes that after the breaking of the “great Australian silence” concerning Aboriginal dispossession, the next generation might well have the task of preventing “a great Australian indifference.” [5]

Krygier and van Krieken have pointed to *Fabrication’s* deeper sub-text concerning the “character of the nation” and the “calibre of British civilisation” that forms its essential motivation. Having said that, however, we must answer the question: what social processes does Windschuttle’s diatribe reflect? Only then is it possible to understand why it has received such support from powerful media and other interests.

It is highly significant that Windschuttle’s account bears no relation to the actual situation that confronted the Tasmanian Aborigines. His is an ideological construct, based on the workings of the so-called “free market”. According to Windschuttle, the Aborigines were faced with the choice of accepting the fruits of British civilisation and British law, or rejecting them. They “chose” to reject them, thus bringing the destruction of their own society, and their eventual extinction, upon themselves. As many writers have remarked, there has seldom, if ever, been so pitiless a justification for the destruction of a tribal society. It is important to recognise, however, that this is no reversion to past attitudes. Rather, it is deeply rooted in contemporary conditions.

Windschuttle is an ideological spokesman for the doctrine of the free market. Those who do not accept its dictates bring the consequences upon themselves—just like the Tasmanian Aborigines. That is why he has received such support from right-wing, free market spokesmen. The unrelenting manner in which the victims of colonisation are blamed for their own demise—because they failed to make the right “choices”—can only arise in a society where any conception of social equality and justice has been swept aside in favor of “user pays” and so-called “market rationality”.

Furthermore, it can hardly be accidental that Windschuttle’s diatribe should appear at the dawning of a new era of colonial conquest. He articulates the prevailing outlook in ruling circles. As American imperialism seeks to establish its global domination, so books appear hailing the “glory days” of the British Empire.

Windschuttle’s denunciation of the indigenous Tasmanians as pimps, murderers and thieves is not simply an attempt to revise history. The script is driven by a more contemporary agenda. Just as he vilifies Tasmanian Aborigines who attacked colonial settlements as “modern-day junkies raiding service stations for money” because they rejected the “benefits” of British colonialism, so the media and political establishment denounce resistance fighters in Iraq as thugs, terrorists and fascists because they oppose the advance to “democracy” under the US occupation.

The dispossession and extermination of the Aboriginal population was the outcome of the expansionary drive of the newly established capitalist mode of production. Today, a new era of imperialist violence and colonialism has begun. This does not represent, however, the dynamism of a new and powerful social order, with a progressive historical role still to play. Rather it is the product of a social order in deep terminal decay.

What historical lessons must be drawn? Not those put forward by the liberals: that “reconciliation”, a sense of shame, and compensation will

bring about a more harmonious and tolerant society. That is not what the history wars are really all about.

Justifying the violent crimes of the past is the ideological preparation for even greater crimes in the present and future. Having established itself through dispossession and extermination, the capitalist system, in its hour of crisis, will stop at nothing. The conflict over history is the surest sign that enormous political battles are on the agenda. We must probe the past, not to laugh, not to weep but to understand—and in so doing, prepare for the future. As Rosa Luxemburg put it so well in an earlier period: “This brutal triumphant procession of capitalism throughout the world, accompanied by all means of force, robbery, and of infamy, has one bright phase: it has created the premises for its final overthrow, it has established the capitalist world rule upon which, alone, the socialist world revolution can follow.” [6]

Concluded

Notes:

- 1) Henry Reynolds, “Terra Nullius Reborn” in *Whitewash*, p. 109
- 2) Marx, *Capital* Volume 3, p. 911
- 3) Marx, *Capital* Volume I, p. 926
- 4) *Whitewash*, p. 135
- 5) op cit, pp. 3, 5, 12
- 6) Rosa Luxemburg “The Junius Pamphlet” in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, p. 325



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact