

Australian media attacks Germaine Greer over essay on Aboriginal violence

Richard Phillips
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Australia's mainstream media last week launched a series of hysterical denunciations of Germaine Greer, the well-known feminist, academic and op-ed columnist for the British-based *Guardian* newspaper. The occasion was the publication of Greer's *On Rage*, a 10,000-word essay about the plight of Australia's indigenous population.

On Rage attempts to explain the underlying reasons for the dysfunctional character of many Aboriginal communities and, in particular, the persistence of violent and self-destructive behaviour by Aboriginal males. Marshalling historical facts, sociological data and anecdotal evidence, Greer briefly demonstrates how two centuries of oppression have undermined and, in most cases, destroyed social relations in Aboriginal communities.

Greer notes that Aboriginal people were dispossessed and subjected to systematic violence, kidnapping, prostitution of women and children and semi-slavery working conditions. Alcoholism, substance abuse and increasing domestic violence were thus the by-product of these crimes and other forms of social humiliation.

On Rage draws parallels between Australian Aborigines and the situation facing Native Americans in Canada and cites a study of the Ojibwa, or Chippewa, communities following their relocation in 1973, eight years after a paper mill had poisoned local water supplies with methyl mercury.

"Within a short period following relocation, sexual assault, child neglect and abuse, extreme alcohol abuse, petrol-sniffing and death through violence became epidemic within the community. Men beat women and abused children, women discarded dependent infants and abused children, and older children beat and raped younger children" [*On Rage* by Germaine Greer, Melbourne University Press (2008), page 29].

Such destructive behaviour, Greer explains, was repeated in other dislocated hunter-gatherer communities around the world.

On Rage also points out that while suicide was virtually unknown in Aboriginal communities until thirty years ago, Australia's indigenous population now has one of the

highest suicide rates in the world.

"Such agonised self-destruction is the result of lifetimes of being pushed and dragged hither and yon, at every step losing more, and yet more, of what makes any human life worth living. While tribes have been wiped out; remnants of tribes have been forced to amalgamate with their traditional enemies; traditional lands have been alienated; people of disparate groups have been rounded up and resettled in polyglot assemblages in remote communities; others have been trucked back and forth from one dumping ground to another. Aboriginal people have lost ... their health, their education, their families, their social networks, their culture, their religion; their languages and their self-esteem ..." [ibid, page 30-31].

Greer, moreover, unlike the overwhelming majority of Australian journalists and "small-l liberals", has refused to endorse the government's Northern Territory intervention into Aboriginal communities or join the lavish praise for Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's official apology in February to members of the Stolen Generations (Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from parents as part of official government policy up until the early 1970s). *On Rage* warns that the NT intervention "will do nothing to assuage" the rage felt by many Aboriginal men and could even see more violent attacks on those wives or girlfriends who supported the intervention.

Greer's essay is anathema to Australia's ruling elite and its hired media hacks. For them, the plight of Aboriginal people has nothing to do with the history and nature of capitalism, nor is it an expression of class oppression. They regard it as the product of individual, not social, problems which can only be resolved by forcing individuals to "change" and "take responsibility". This inevitably means punishing the victims—through the elimination of welfare payments if certain stipulated behaviours are not altered and the introduction of yet more "law and order" measures—repudiating any conception of social responsibility or democratic rights. As far as the government and media are concerned, the real cause of social dysfunction is social

welfare—which is now routinely characterised as a “left-wing” palliative that has “mollycoddled” Aborigines for far too long.

Predictably, Greer’s appearance on local television and radio to promote her essay occasioned a vitriolic response. She was denounced as an ignorant attention-seeking expatriate, a racist, anti-feminist, neo-colonialist and a defender of the perpetrators of “male violence”.

The evidence and arguments presented in *On Rage* were either ignored or entirely distorted.

Miranda Devine from the Fairfax-owned *Sydney Morning Herald*, for example, simply resorted to hurling insults. Greer, she declared, was “a misogynist” who had always behaved like a “precious indulged child”. “Never having had children, or lived an extended period of domestic bliss with a man, she [Greer] has rejected the experience and choice of most women.... her emotional development never progressed much past 12, leaving her suspended in a mindset of doing or saying anything to get a boy’s attention.”

Right-wing ideologue Andrew Bolt from Murdoch’s *Herald Sun* berated Greer for “her unreason, her racialism and her spectacularly ignorant worship of the Noble Savage. Here is a manifesto of irresponsibility, cheered by the roars of the irresponsible.”

According to Bolt, domestic violence in Aboriginal communities had nothing to do with the decades of social dislocation imposed on their inhabitants, but was part and parcel of traditional Aboriginal culture, something, he claimed, that preceded European settlement.

On August 15, the *Australian* newspaper editorialised that Greer was blaming “white men for black men’s anger” and was “locked in to the progressive consensus of the 1960s and 70s”. “The emerging consensus [today],” it continued, “... sees welfarism rather than colonialism, and separatism rather than assimilation, as the reasons why indigenous Australians are trapped in a cycle of disadvantage.”

Joining this reactionary tirade, which aims at suppressing all discussion of the crimes committed against Aboriginal people over the past two centuries, was Aboriginal academic Marcia Langton. Writing in the *Australian* the next day, Langton claimed that *On Rage* was a “racist attack on Aboriginal people” and that Greer had “come to the defence of those who destroyed their innocence and damaged their sense of self.”

“We are trying to ensure a dignified future for Aboriginal children,” she continued. “This goal is not one that interests Greer in the least, as her essay abundantly demonstrates.”

Langton’s hypocrisy is nothing short of breathtaking. Notwithstanding her claims of concern, she remains an enthusiastic supporter of the NT intervention, the most serious assault on the living standards and basic democratic

rights of Aboriginal people—men, women and children—in forty years.

Contrary to the claims of Langton and the corporate media, the goal of the intervention is not to protect Aboriginal children or families. It has involved the ongoing suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act, cuts to welfare benefits and other social supports to so-called “unviable” Aboriginal communities, the imposition of government managers on Aboriginal communities and the seizure of valuable Aboriginal-occupied land. NT Aborigines are being treated as guinea pigs to trial welfare-cutting measures to be used against other working people around the country—indigenous and non-indigenous alike.

Greer’s opponents falsely label her a “Marxist”, on the basis that she makes at least some reference to history and the historical record. *On Rage*, however, is not guided by a Marxist perspective. It makes no appeal for the unification of working people to put an end to capitalism, the source of the ongoing oppression of Australia’s Aborigines, concluding, on the contrary, with a call for a “treaty” between the government and the Aboriginal population.

Greer claims such a national treaty would give Aboriginal people social dignity and help to overcome some of the essential problems they confront. In this, she, too, is a defender of the existing social order—covering up the fact that unless and until the capitalist system is replaced with a society whose organising principle is human need, not private profit, none of the horrendous problems facing the indigenous population will even begin to be resolved.

Notwithstanding Greer’s false perspective, *On Rage* is a humane and at times passionate work. The furious media denunciations are yet another indication that Australia’s ruling elite cannot tolerate any objective discussion of Australian history and the treatment of indigenous people. Greer’s subjection to hysterical personal abuse is nothing but an effort to intimidate her—and anyone else who tries to expose the dirty secrets of Australian capitalism—into silence.



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