

***Governing Natives: Indirect Rule and Settler Colonialism in Australia's North* by Ben Silverstein**

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Conversation between Jessica Urwin and Ben Silverstein
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Jessica: To begin with, I wanted to ask you what aspect of your research most intrigued you, provided you with the most conceptual challenge or surprised you the most?

Ben: One of the more intriguing elements of the research, to me at least, was the imperial frame within which many Australians located themselves in the first half of the twentieth century. In some ways this research project began with my puzzling over a proposal, made in the late 1920s by the Adelaide-based Aborigines' Protection League, for a model Aboriginal state in Arnhem Land that would be governed by Aboriginal people largely according to their own laws and customs.

Trying to think the proposal through, I couldn't quite make sense of it other than by analogy with Bantustans in apartheid South Africa. This seemed apposite but also didn't quite seem to fit. A few other historians had written of the model state plan as a benevolent effort to grant a kind of self-determination, mirroring the way it was positioned by some in the 1920s.¹ But this was a form of self-determination that was fabricated

1 Kevin Blackburn, 'White Agitation for an Aboriginal State in Australia (1925–1929)', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 45, no. 2 (1999): 161–62, doi.org/10.1111/1467-8497.00060; Michael Roe, 'A Model Aboriginal State', *Aboriginal History* 10 (1986): 44; Tim Rowse, 'What if the Federal Government had Created a Model Aboriginal State?', in *What If? Australian History as It Might Have Been* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2006).

without the work or even input of those who would be gifted rights were it to be introduced. In that sense, it seemed like something of a container for what we might call self-determination or perhaps even sovereignty.

It made sense once I began working in the Aborigines' Protection League's papers and found its members to be thoroughly embedded, in part via Mary Bennett, in imperial networks of liberalism and humanitarianism. They were reading Jan Smuts and Lucy Mair, following British Government inquiries and reports into Kenya, and were attuned to Australia's imperial role in Papua and New Guinea. They distilled from these a sense of how best to govern a colony, and the model state proposal came from their reading of the ways indirect rule worked in British colonies in Africa and the Pacific. Their plan drew on these ideas, just as South African ideologues would draw on these traditions to describe Bantustans a few decades later.

What the Aborigines' Protection League and its supporters were trying to do in Australia was to introduce a form of 'native administration'; for them, it was in the Northern Territory and, specifically, in Arnhem Land, that this could be done. This revealed, among other things, some of the ways ideas of race and authenticity worked in their thinking as a local iteration of knowledges that circulated through varied imperial networks. The more I researched, the more I found that other white Australians were drawing on similar influences and were understanding their colonising role in the Northern Territory in the context of the British Empire.

Thinking in this way helped put Australian settler colonial specificity in its proper context in relation to other colonialisms, as well as in relation to different Indigenous formations. And it helped make sense of some of the ways Indigenous people have been subject to a range of governing projects in the different regions of Australia.

Jessica: What I find intriguing about your response, and *Governing Natives* more broadly, is that you are dealing with examples of imperialism and various colonialisms in a period considered by many to be 'post-imperial' or 'post-colonial'. As you note, the interwar period retains many of the imperial sentiments of the preceding period, with perhaps more influence from humanitarianism and growing internationalism. In highlighting this, you make an important comment on periodisation in historical research. To what extent do you understand colonialism and imperialism

to be persistent on both a global and national scale? Or was the Northern Territory simply unique in terms of being a late arrival to the colonial experiment in Australia?

Ben: ‘Post-colonial’ in a sense, but decolonisation was an emergent project in much of the world in the interwar period, not yet having achieved the transfer of state power outside of a few exceptions. But the question of periodisation, I think, is so crucial in centring different kinds of historical experiences. We see this really clearly in settler colonial situations—for example, in national histories in which American independence in 1776 marks the end of a colonial period and the inauguration of a new republican era; or, in the Australian context, in histories in which Federation in 1901 forms a crucial hinge for histories of the nation. But to periodise in these ways is to centre American or Australian settlers’ sense of themselves as attaining freedom by becoming independent of British control. I’m thinking here of Aziz Rana’s work on the American revolution, or Ann Curthoys and Jessie Mitchell’s study of settler self-government in Australia, and the different ways they show that settler autonomy emerged through Indigenous and Black subordination.² In this sense, the so-called end of the colonial period marked an intensification of settler domination, if anything.

As a result, Indigenous experiences are of a different order. We can learn here from the many Indigenous writers and historians who have emphasised continuity, reminding us that little changes for them when settlers are freed from overseas suzerainty. The experiences of land theft, of confinement, of political erasure and so on persist irrespective of moments of settler liberation. And, while the forms in which these experiences take shape change over time and across space, they won’t end until they are transformed by a process of meaningful decolonisation.

We might also recall here that even the formal decolonisation experienced across Asia, Africa and the Pacific has not changed everything. Building on earlier thinkers like Nkrumah, Lumumba, Hau’ofa and others, Tracey Banivanua Mar described decolonisation not as an event but as a long and unfinished process of Indigenous dialogues with colonisation and

2 Aziz Rana, *Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), 20–98, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv9hzrjm; Ann Curthoys and Jessie Mitchell, *Taking Liberty: Indigenous Rights and Settler Self-Government in Colonial Australia, 1830–1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), doi.org/10.1017/9781316027035.

international responses to their agitation.³ The political transfer of power doesn't mark a rupture but rather a moment within a longer history. Until that history comes to fruition, thinking in terms of colonial continuities—and Indigenous persistence—remains, I think, essential.

Jessica: I couldn't agree with you more, but I am aware that defining both the colonial and the 'post-colonial' has been fundamental to scholarly debates for decades, not least within Australian history. However, a 'post-colonial' framework is perhaps not the most useful frame for thinking about Australia's history. You suggest that a settler colonial framework yields greater analysis. And what *Governing Natives* demonstrates so starkly is that many of the ways in which settler colonialism operates—especially in the Northern Territory—relies on both its contradictory and fragile nature. Its intention appears as unintentional. For example, in Chapter 3 you address the Northern Territory's desire to pursue a White Australia at all costs—including the assimilation of Aboriginal Australians into this social structure through the eradication of Indigenous culture. Yet, White Australia relied fundamentally on the exploitation of a Black labour force, upheld through the maintenance of aspects of Aboriginal culture. What role do these contradictions play in the successes and/or failures of the settler colonial experiment in Australia's north?

Ben: I think you've turned us here to a key element of historical analyses of settler colonialism—that is, their commitment to transforming our current dispensation, rather than seeking out what works within it. What I was trying to show in this book was that, despite the current-day persistence of settler colonialism, we don't know what's going to happen: its end is neither impossible nor unimaginable. In fact, settler sovereignty is unstable, is based on unresolved and often unacknowledged antagonisms and is continually revised in response to Indigenous articulations. It is historical and incomplete, and it can be overcome.

The argument I presented in discussing the Northern Territory pastoral industry was an attempt at a conjunctural analysis. As you point out, white occupation of the Territory was effected through pastoralism, a cattle industry that was encouraged—along with its mainly Black workforce—by a Commonwealth Government explicitly concerned to produce a white north. This represents an ideological contradiction in

3 Tracey Banivanua Mar, *Decolonisation and the Pacific: Indigenous Globalisation and the Ends of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139794688.

which white settlement, with its commitment to white workers, rested upon Black labour. And this reliance points us to a material contradiction, as the pastoral industry was dependent on both the work of Aboriginal labour and a rate of exploitation so severe as to render the survival of those workers precarious.

The specific way administrators recognised and represented the crises that emerged from these contradictions as they coalesced in the 1930s conditioned the trajectory of settler colonialism in the Northern Territory and its turn to a new form of government. But these representations weren't all-determining, and were in constant dialogue with Aboriginal people's struggles to maintain and reinvent their communities in circumstances not of their own choosing. I do not want this to be seen as unique, as a case of north Australian exceptionalism: settler colonialism is always contradictory and always faces inventive Indigenous persistence.

One might point to the history of Coranderrk station in late nineteenth-century Victoria, where Kulin peoples gathered and responded to assimilationist pressures by creatively generating new and successful ways of relating with country as an Aboriginal community. But settler colonial assimilation policies were designed to produce Aboriginal disappearance, not Aboriginal survival and resurgence. In response, Victoria instituted a punitive managerial regime, stripped Coranderrk residents of the land they farmed, and turned to a more explicitly racialised practice of biological assimilation that would split up Kulin communities. Settler strategies are always reactionary, produced in response both to the contradictions in prior practices and to Aboriginal negotiations. Now, a part of Coranderrk is back in Wurundjeri hands, testifying to the possibilities that result from Indigenous persistence and resurgence.

Jessica: I want to draw out the discussion of acknowledging Aboriginal agency a little more, as you allude to it throughout *Governing Natives*. In particular, you focus upon Aboriginal labour and the role of capitalism in organising the Northern Territory. But you also point to work as a way for Aboriginal people to exercise agency and remain connected to country. In what ways did you find labour, capitalism and settler colonialism intersecting in your research? And in what way is labour central to the Northern Territory's enactment of indirect rule in the twentieth century?

Ben: Indigenous labour is often marginalised in discussions of settler colonialism that rest too heavily on the distinction Patrick Wolfe drew between colonial formations that extracted value through the exploitation of native labour on the one hand, and those that produced value through the expropriation and use of native land on the other. Wolfe insisted that, in settler colonial situations, exploitation of native labour was subordinate to projects of land dispossession.⁴ But this has often been read as a claim that Indigenous labour was, in fact, irrelevant as a strategy of settler domination, effacing the reliance on that labour that has characterised most instances of settler colonialism. This is a scholarly problem that recurs whenever we examine settler colonial situations in their empirical and regional specificity, including in Australia's north where, as we have discussed, white occupation of land relied upon Aboriginal workers.

Indirect rule provided colonial administrators with a way of thinking about managing that labour. I've argued that we can conceptualise indirect rule as the government of what anthropologists termed 'native society' by conducting their social forces to guide their customary institutions. It was used to manage articulations between those 'native societies' and colonising production; in much of Nigeria, for instance, it took constitutional form through granting customary chiefs powers to compel their subjects to work to produce raw commodities for British-owned trading companies and factories. This locally specific form aside, it was in general a way of mobilising customary institutions to generate labour. And this was transferrable to the Northern Territory.

There, settlers neither found nor appointed customary chiefs; but they did recognise the presence of 'native societies' whose traditions they tried to conduct towards the provision of labour. In this sense, the form of indirect rule that was implemented in the Territory in the late 1930s was intended to secure an Aboriginal labour supply for white-owned pastoral stations.

We need to think about that labour in its specific form, both as a settler colonial strategy of Indigenous erasure, and as Indigenous experiences of both land dispossession and a means of assuring ongoing relationships with country. What Glen Coulthard calls the settler colonial relation was here marked by multiple projects of government, by the exploitation of

4 Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999), 29.

Aboriginal land and labour, and by emergent and multiplying Indigenous articulations and practices of resurgence.⁵ The resultant dispensation was complex, and was differentiated across the Northern Territory, demanding complexity in our historical analysis.

Jessica: Your reference to ‘emergent and multiplying Indigenous articulations and practices of resurgence’ makes me think of another significant theme that emerges throughout *Governing Natives*: space. Space is conceptualised as fluid; it is used effectively by settlers and Aboriginal people alike. The reader is left with the sense that space and its shifting iterations were central to indirect rule under settler colonialism. While you have already touched briefly on Aboriginal resurgence in relation to labour and country, can you comment on the politics of space for both Aboriginal communities and white Australians in this period in the Northern Territory’s history?

Ben: Ordering complexity through ordering space was one of the key problems of colonial government. Thinking historically, it brings together a range of questions, including those of legal pluralism, Indigenous mobilities and the production of race.

Race, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so often became expressed in a spatial register. As I’ve noted elsewhere, the South African Prime Minister B. J. Vorster claimed, in 1973, that: ‘If I were to wake up one morning and find myself a black man, the only major difference would be geographical.’⁶ He was, entirely disingenuously, defending a system of segregation in which differences were, of course, much more than geographical, but there is nonetheless something worth thinking about behind the claim. Colonial states tended to work to constitute race and space together as a way of ordering people and territory.

We see this in the establishment of so-called inviolable reserves, in the planning and mapping of buffer stations on their borders and pastoral stations beyond them, and in the marking out towns with prohibited

5 Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816679645.001.0001.

6 Ben Silverstein and Patrick Wolfe, ‘Ideologies’, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Modern Imperial Histories*, ed. Philippa Levine and John Marriott (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 484.

areas. This emerges in a place like Australia as a project of transforming Indigenous country to be related to into settler territory to be governed. Space would be used to stage and manifest difference.

But instituting impervious separation was unsustainable. People moving over imagined frontiers and other demarcated lines of containment consistently disturbed the spatial imagination of colonial segregation. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal spaces overlapped in relations that were not always those of complete domination. Pastoral stations, for instance, were mapped on the presumption that territory was objectifiable and entirely understandable, including the Aboriginal waterholes to which pastoralists were led. In the same space, Aboriginal people continued to relate to a country that was rich with cultural as well as economic meaning. Wandering cattle left tracks that stamped down, but did not erase, that country. When Aboriginal people were noticed practising their laws in spaces like pastoral stations, their action generated governmental problems that were ultimately unresolvable.

I say little in the book about specific Aboriginal country and its characteristics, perhaps a failing of the overall work. But we can note here that different spaces were articulated together and transformed by each other, and that the establishment of indirect rule was an attempt to order this articulation.

Jessica: Towards the end of your book—and in relation to the notion that different spaces were articulated together—you introduce several themes that have become incredibly important in Aboriginal history: agency, survival and political engagement. You articulate these throughout the book in terms of both individualism and collective agency, irrespective of the repressive nature of white administration in Australia's north. What role do you see the historical acknowledgement of agency, survival and political engagement playing in contemporary discussions about settler colonialism?

Ben: Indigenous people have always worked out, and will continue to work out, ways of eluding, confounding, obstructing and resisting the logic of elimination characteristic of settler colonialism. Historians need to tend to these practices, alongside those Indigenous practices of working within and accommodating the social and political artefacts of settler colonialism in ways that substantially complicate our analysis. These are all forms of engagement or refusal that we should think carefully about. Often, it is

these efforts that render Indigenous elimination a project or attempt rather than a fait accompli; Indigenous survival is less a result of settler or governmental benevolence as it is an effect of Indigenous persistence and resistance that emerges from sovereign Indigenous communities.

If we are trying to write in solidarity with decolonising projects, we need, I think, to develop useful ways of understanding the nature of settler colonialism and its contradictions. But I also think it's true, as Shino Konishi has recently pointed out, that we need to historicise settler colonialism and Indigeneity together.⁷ The way we do that remains contentious.

One productive way forward might be to account for Indigenous cosmologies and philosophies of spatiality and temporality, for the many ways Indigenous peoples have articulated their societies with encroaching others, and for the ways Indigenous people have acted upon and towards those others: negotiating, refusing, resisting, accommodating, transforming and so on. We can usefully frame this problematic in terms of what Coulthard, quoting Marx, describes as 'modes of life'—'interconnected social totalit[ies]' encompassing the 'economic, political, spiritual, and social'.⁸

I'm not sure a concept of agency, often used in the liberal sense of self-determining individualism, quite gets us there, though it would be worthwhile considering how the kind of 'collective agency' you refer to might emerge and what it might look like. A focus on modes of life, though, might lead us to a sense of the settler colonial social formation as an often unpredictable articulation that can only be understood by looking to entangled but relatively autonomous settler and Indigenous societies. Thinking through the characteristics of these social totalities and their articulations might prove to be a way of unsettling colonialism, of discerning contradictions and devising ways of pushing at them. And this might help us work towards decolonising futures of Indigenous possibility.

7 Shino Konishi, 'First Nations Scholars, Settler Colonial Studies, and Indigenous History', *Australian Historical Studies* 50, no. 3 (2019): 304, doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2019.1620300.

8 Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 65.

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