Foreword

Jon Altman

This book is part of a bold intellectual quest to re-envisage and re-theorise the nature of Indigenous participation in the Australian colonial economy. It has arisen out of an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project between scholars at The Australian National University, the University of New England and the National Museum of Australia that was completed in 2011. This book is the second substantive publication from the project, following on from Indigenous Participation in Australian Economies: Historical and anthropological perspectives, edited by Ian Keen and published by ANU E Press in 2010. The title of this volume—Indigenous Participation in Australian Economies II: Historical engagements and current enterprises—suggests to me that the research project has grown beyond its original intent.

The project’s key goal—to revisit historical, spatially diverse and now contemporary articulations of Indigenous and settler-state and settler-capitalist social and economic forms—is long overdue. It is an ambitious interdisciplinary collaboration; its team of researchers deploys the disciplinary lenses of anthropology, history, economic history, material culture and prehistory (or archaeology). Participating in the public conference held at the National Museum of Australia in November 2009, I was struck that the topic attracted an even wider set of perspectives than originally anticipated, as well as more scholarly interest. And just as the disciplinary perspectives grew so did the time frame under consideration. This raises important questions about how we characterise the temporal and spatial boundaries of the Australian colonial economy: is there still a colonial frontier out there? From an Indigenous perspective, is Australia post colonial or still colonial? As the project has expanded and evolved, it strikes me that it has been well managed by the lead researchers who have been happy not to steer any tight predetermined course.

In his recent article ‘Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native’, Patrick Wolfe (2006) draws on his earlier work to make three points of great pertinence to this project. First, he notes that the colonial invasion and its transformative capitalist system were predicated on wholesale expropriation of the land and resources—the principal settler-colonial logic to eliminate native societies was to gain unrestricted access to territory. Quoting Deborah Bird Rose from her book Hidden Histories (1991), Wolfe reminds us that in order to get in the way of settler colonisation all Indigenous hunter-gatherers had to do was to stay at home. Second, Wolfe notes that settler colonisers came to stay: invasion is structural; it is not some historical event that can be isolated to a particular
place and time such as Sydney in 1788. And third, Wolfe suggests that settler colonialism has both negative and positive dimensions. Negatively, it strives for the dissolution of native societies—a dissolution that in the past included the summary massacre of Indigenous people, as new histories of frontier conflict now document. Positively, a new colonial society is created and a range of new options emerges from the logic of elimination, including integration or assimilation of Indigenous people as citizens—what is referred to today as mainstreaming, with its goal of normalisation or ‘Closing the Gap’ in socioeconomic status according to the norms of the dominant settler-colonial society.

It is not surprising under such circumstances that a diversity of Indigenous participations in Australian economies has resulted, and I note a growing propensity to use plurals to denote this. Such diversity has been documented in research beginning 40 years ago, especially in the series Aborigines in Australian Society under the general guidance of political scientist Charles Rowley, as Ian Keen and Chris Lloyd note in their Introduction to this volume. Two theoretical developments in recent years positively influence the current project of economic reinterpretation and expanded possibilities.

The first is the path-breaking work of Ian Keen in his major study, *Aboriginal Economy and Society: Australia at the threshold of colonisation* (2004). Here Keen meticulously examines available sources to ask to what extent Aboriginal economy and society varied across Australia at the time of British colonisation. This exhaustive work employs a tripartite classification, ecology, institutions and economy, summarises similarities and differences and provides explanation for variation. Having this work on hand provides a frame of reference for understanding from a structural-functionalist perspective the endogamous explanations for diversity of participations. We have clearly moved beyond any crude universalising of the pre-colonial hunter-gatherer mode of production continent wide.

The second development is the broad reflexive shift in the social sciences in recent decades to more inclusively consider economic and social relations from the perspective of those marginalised, subordinated and dominated on the frontier, whose way of life was, and is, challenged and often destroyed. From the earlier writings of Talal Asad and Eric Wolf to more recent translations into English of the works of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, we are now far more comfortable in theoretically incorporating workings of power, conflict and agency into structural analyses. There is a more nuanced engagement today with different logic and a greater acceptance of inevitable contestation over economic values. The writings over a long time of James Scott make it clear that the weak or subordinate will not meekly acquiesce to some predetermined pathway to modernity proposed for them; the weak can strategically deploy many forms of resistance. Similarly, while in the past social scientists might
have overemphasised dualities like kin-based versus market-based economic regimes or customary versus Western economic norms, recent scholarship is moving beyond such essentialised binaries to a greater recognition of ongoing contestation and associated new forms of economic mixture, accommodation, adaptation, adoption, interdependence and even symbiosis. To return to Patrick Wolfe’s ideas and terms, the contributors to this volume ask how native elimination has been challenged by the natives or the natives and their allies at the local and regional levels.

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I was honoured to be invited to give the opening keynote address to the conference on which this volume is based. I had participated in an earlier conference in Auckland in December 2008 reported in *Indigenous Participation in Australian Economies: Historical and anthropological perspectives* and so could already see the project’s potential to provide insights deploying these new perspectives and fresh empirical case material.

I was asked by the conference organisers to speak about my particular conceptualisation of the hybrid economy. I chose to highlight its role as a political project, with political being used in a broader sense than the usual conflicts over the ownership and distribution of resources; I had also developed this notion for discursive conflicts that have rapidly escalated in Australian society in the early twenty-first century, although structurally they had always been there, it was just an issue of degree.

My address was titled ‘The hybrid economy as political project: reflections from the Indigenous estate’, and I was especially keen to launch the conference with some provocation around the notion of scholarship as political and of economic hybridity as not just being geographically limited to the very remote areas where I do most of my research. Owing to unforeseen circumstances, my opening address was further developed for publication in *Culture Crisis: Anthropology and politics in Aboriginal Australia* (2010), a volume that I co-edited with Melinda Hinkson. I would have liked to include my essay here as it resonates with so many others and I could have doubled my Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC) points, but this did not seem proper.

I was hopeful that participants at the conference would critically engage with the notion of economic hybridity that I have been promulgating as a conceptual tool for properly understanding the diverse and at times very complex forms of production regime informed by intercultural social norms. I was especially keen to advocate for the rejection of a host of crude dualities like market/non-market,
formal/informal, Indigenous/non-Indigenous, real economy/welfare economy that take us nowhere in understanding the empirically grounded complexity of diverse Indigenous economies.

At the same time, I have become increasingly aware that despite the failure of the neo-liberal ascendancy and the free market to actually deliver much to Indigenous Australia, there is a dominant ideological, discursive, intellectual and even policy commitment to this form of development. And yet it seems to me that any hasty adherence to neo-liberal globalisation during a time of great global uncertainty is an extremely risky venture. This is a view shared by many Indigenous people living culturally and geographically beyond the mainstream. For them, economic plurality and cultural diversity might be less risky than some imagined seamless, conflict-free integration into the mainstream—as if the asymmetry of power relations in Australian society and a history of neglect, marginalisation and racism can magically be wished away.

The political project that I am promoting is for scholarship to be deployed to challenge the dominance of a discourse that focuses only on the capitalist economy and notions of Indigenous deficiency as defined by statistics that reflect Western social norms. The very project of improvement, to use the language of Tania Murray Li in *The Will to Improve* (2008), looks to reshape any Aboriginal values, beliefs, social relations and practices that remain distinct from mainstream norms. This project needs to be questioned. This is partly because it is not new in the Australian context; it revisits earlier failed attempts to shape Aboriginal subjectivities, to sedentarise, civilise, normalise, to ‘develop’ Aboriginal people, to transform them into subjects of the global project of modernity, to become responsible citizens of a multicultural, liberal democratic state, to be hardworking labourers or profit-driven entrepreneurs in a free market, to be capitalist consumers of mass culture. It is also because it does not accord with principles articulated in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that the Australian Government endorsed in April 2009.

The contributions within this book take on this challenge admirably by properly integrating people and agency and differing cultural perspectives into an elaborate scholarly mosaic of analyses, interpretations and reinterpretations. This is a key strength of this volume: the consistent purpose of authors not to pre-empt any economic development pathway for Indigenous people, but to question an emerging monolithic view of what Aboriginal economic futures should be, by providing a more complex appreciation of what has gone on, and continues to go on, at the frontier.
One wants to open a conference with challenges but not with undue pessimism. And so I ended my keynote address by quoting from the poem and song *Anthem* by Leonard Cohen:

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That’s how the light gets in.

Loic Wacquant’s recent reading and translation of Pierre Bourdieu in *Punishing the Poor* (2007) provides grounds for optimism. Bourdieu’s proposition is that the state cannot be construed as monolithic but rather as a splintered space of forces vying over the definition and distribution of public goods in what he terms ‘the bureaucratic field’. Today in Indigenous affairs the bureaucratic field is locked in struggle between the dominant Right Hand of the state promulgating normalisation and the subordinate Left Hand promulgating greater choice. Cohen’s words might be invoked as a means of exploiting cracks in the bureaucratic field to support Indigenous aspirations and desires that are not currently accommodated by the Australian state and its current ‘Closing the Gap’ policy obsession.

Cohen’s poem is open to another metaphoric adaptation here: there can be cracks too in how we challenge previously dominant intellectual interpretations of the past and the present. In my view, this volume and its contributions do just that: they allow the light in so that we can see more clearly the emergence of local and regional ‘hybrid economies’ involving articulations of Indigenous and settler social and economic forms, and the emergence of new complexes of transactions and relations over the past two centuries. This is a very worthwhile project that will, in my view, make significant contributions to our understandings of the forms of Indigenous participations in Australian ‘frontier’ economies.

**References**


