Governing Natives: Indirect Rule and Settler Colonialism in Australia's North

by Ben Silverstein

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Ben Silverstein's *Governing Natives: Indirect Rule and Settler Colonialism in Australia's North* is a deeply researched, theoretically sophisticated and highly readable book, which makes the new and compelling argument that the Aboriginal New Deal, a major reform of Commonwealth policy in the Northern Territory in 1939, can be interpreted as a form of 'indirect rule'. The book opens with an account of the death in 1937 of a Pintubi man at a pastoral station on the Ormiston River in Central Australia during an intra-tribal argument. This event prompted a visiting patrol officer, Ted Strehlow, to ponder what he should do when (as Silverstein puts it) 'Aboriginal people had acted as though unconcerned by the spectre of his authority' (p. 1). Strehlow was unsure as to whether any of those involved should be charged and tried; the applicability of settler law was at least questionable. The case highlighted the problems of physical and jurisdictional coexistence; of Aboriginal people who were essentially self-governing and were also choosing to move through settler spaces around pastoral stations.

This recognition by the anthropologically trained Strehlow, of the workings of Indigenous law and sovereignty, presented a series of dilemmas that are the subject of Silverstein's book. The author considers how, during a series of crises in the Northern Territory in the 1930s, the Commonwealth authorities decided the best solution was to incorporate 'the political rationality of indirect rule into the practice of government in Australia' (p. 6).

After an introductory chapter, Silverstein proceeds in Chapter 2 to chart a genealogy of indirect rule, a trend in imperialism that spanned the British Empire. Emerging in the wake of the 1857 Indian Rebellion, it was notably expressed in Fiji, refined in Nigeria, and codified by the first governor general of that colony, Frederick Lugard,

in a book published in 1922. Reaching its apogee of influence in the interwar period, indirect rule involved governing through rather than in opposition to Indigenous hierarchies, aiming 'to expand the productive capacities of native societies and appropriate the surplus' (p. 33).

In Chapters 3–5, Silverstein charts three distinct crises that enveloped the administration of the Northern Territory in the 1930s. The first was an economic crisis within a pastoral industry that depended on Aboriginal labour, but in exploitative conditions that made the survival of that labour force uncertain. The second was a crisis of law – of how to deal with sometimes violent expressions of Indigenous sovereignty. It found its initial solution through the expertise of anthropology, and notably the work of Donald Thompson in Arnhem Land. The third crisis was one of protest, with both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people beginning to question the legitimacy of the regime in the Territory overseen by the chief protector, Cecil Cook.

These crises converged in 1938 in the office of the newly appointed minister for internal affairs, John McEwen, who found on his desk reports on both the travails of the pastoral industry and on Thompson's inquiries in Arnhem Land. He also received deputations from activists, who were especially active in 1938. Strongly influenced by the anthropologist A. P. Elkin, McEwen developed a new policy that attempted to reconcile these various challenges, and that articulated closely with his aim of northern economic development. This complementary relationship between Aboriginal administration and economic development, through a pastoral industry supported by government investment, leads to Silverstein's interpretation of the Aboriginal New Deal as a form of indirect rule.

Chapters 6 and 7 describe the new policy. Chapter 6 focuses on Aboriginal reserves, which Silverstein argues were intended to promote civilisation and assimilation, but on a slow, even asymptotic, time scale. Crucially, these reserves were to be governed indirectly, using anthropologically trained officers who understood the subtle structures of Aboriginal social organisation. Chapter 7 considers how the long march to civilisation for Aboriginal people would be driven by participation in new types of labour: work was 'transformative, the mechanism of progress' (p. 161). The chapter considers practices such as rationing and the seasonal walkabout, which are interpreted through the logic of indirect rule.

Silverstein's book makes a significant contribution to the theoretical literature on settler colonialism. He avoids adopting the sharp distinction of the theorist Lorenzo Veracini that 'settler colonialism is not colonialism' (p. 6), but acknowledges his intellectual debt to another pioneer of settler colonial studies, Patrick Wolfe, a supervisor of the doctoral thesis upon which the book is based. Wolfe contrasted settler colonial Australia, where the colonial imperative was typically to eliminate Indigenous people from the land, to franchise colonies elsewhere in the empire, where the extraction of Indigenous labour was the modus operandi. Silverstein insists, however, that it is not enough to distinguish Australia from colonies like Nigeria, and that scholars must

also recognise regional variation within Australia: 'the Ormiston River (NT) was not Melbourne' (p. 7). His purpose is to 'trace gradations across a dynamic and unified empire' (p. 7), and he does this through the lens of indirect rule, 'a political mentality … that was articulated distinctly in each contingent space' (p. 8).

In exploring both the strengths and limits of settler colonial theory, Silverstein is on fertile ground in the Northern Territory, where elimination and integration coexisted in messy ways – where the urge to clear the land and create a White Australia was complicated by the need to exploit Indigenous labour in a fragile pastoral economy. The New Deal was a short-lived policy, with the advent of the Second World War soon transforming the Northern Territory in profound ways; but, as Silverstein's rich and rewarding book demonstrates, it is well worth detailed consideration, as it occurred at a pivotal moment in Australian race relations.

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