

# Table of Contents

Excerpt on the invasion . . . . .	1
-----------------------------------	---



# Excerpt on the invasion

By Angela Mitropoulos

This extract from an unfinished text by Angela Mitropoulos, posted on archive : s0metim3s (<http://archive.blogsome.com/2007/08/07/indigenous-land/#comments>), gives part of the historical background (which some European readers may have overlooked) to the current military-medical invasion of Aboriginal land in Australia's Northern Territory. Most importantly, the text explains the concrete connection between intervention in the name of 'health' and 'education', the blackmailing of the 'economically inactive' into the 'job-seeking' reserve army, and the rush to extract resource rents from legally inalienable Aboriginal land.

After persistent campaigns for indigenous land rights that reached a high-point in the 1980s, in 1992 the High Court effectively voided the principle of terra nullius – 'empty land' – which had served as the legal condition of expropriation and colonisation. Promptly following this judgement, successive Labor and Liberal-National governments elaborated a series of so-called Native Title laws that placed increasingly difficult and complex restrictions on which lands could be re-claimed by indigenous people and under what conditions. Such laws, as was the case with wider multicultural policies whose object was the integration and representation of non-Anglo-Celtic communities, the very sense of who was represented and recognised as part of discrete 'ethnicities' and 'communities' became a matter that turned both around inclusion and exclusion, precipitating often bitter and sometimes violent contests for representation and its bureaucratic and/or largely minor fiscal benefits. To put this another way: the really-existing consequence of multiculturalism was the 'internalisation' of conflict in the form of disputes over authenticity, identity and its borders.

Even so, the enactment of Native Title laws was widely hailed as an accomplishment of liberalism, a sign of beneficence and national maturity. But it would also serve to situate questions about indigenous life – and the persistence of slow death in the form of the well-known diseases and blights of destitution – as questions internal to indigenous 'culture', as dysfunction and pathology arising from an inherent failure by indigenous peoples to integrate, modernise, and 'move on'. In "Disappointing Indigenous People: Violence and the Refusal of Help", Gillian Cowlishaw puts it this way:

The legitimating of cultural difference, especially in the recognition of land claims and native title, was always the target of contempt for those despised as rednecks and populists. Gradually, as the expected benefits were not apparent, as images of black people still sitting in the dust remained on our television screens, and as dispiriting statistics continued to be published, an uneasiness with self-determination and with recognition of Indigenous tradition extended into the most sympathetic and caring segments of the public. The earlier backlash concerned the continued drain on the public purse, which is widely seen to be generous toward Indigenous people. But now there is a perception that the Indigenous social body may be recalcitrant, unable or perhaps unwilling to be helped (Johns 2001), or being offered the wrong kind of help by mistaken politicians or bureaucrats (Folds 2001). In the midst of a generalized goodwill, pity vies with impatience toward those who receive as well as toward those who offer the nation's beneficence. (2003: 109)

Indeed, the traumatic encounter by liberals with those who seemed to refuse the ministrations of the 'helping professions' would become the righteous bridge that would shift many to clamour for punitive and, at times, paramilitary measures. Most notably, the Australian Medical Association called for military intervention to stem gang violence, and the head of the Northern Territory branch of the Australian Medical Association wrote to the Prime Minister declaring that indigenous people were "culturally incapable of managing health services".

And so, in mid-2007 – and the affective landscape of an impending election, in which authoritarian sovereign gestures have long served as leverage in Australian politics, cannot be understated – the

Australian government declared a ‘national emergency’ on the pretext of an anecdotal ‘epidemic’ of child sexual abuse in remote indigenous communities. The emergency and the exceptions it elaborated were both juridical – insofar as the measures it elaborated suspended the normal functioning of the law – and depoliticising. One cannot deny the necessity and urgency of ‘doing something, anything’ – but, in reality, ‘doing this’ that the government has announced – to stop children being abused without risking moral and unquestionable rebuke. Therefore, questions about the specific measures enacted – including whether they might have any bearing or impact on child sexual abuse – have been constantly shadowed by accusations of denying the existence of abuse or, worse, excusing it on grounds of ‘cultural relativism’.

In other words, that indigenous peoples were more liable to sexually abuse children had already been established as fact, just as in 2001 government reports – since falsified – that undocumented boat arrivals had thrown their children in the water was similarly widely believed, and denounced as the abhorrent pretext for even harsher border policing. Here, racialisation steps in as a priori determination of the guilt of others and, therefore, as the justification of every possible measure against them, not least those which liberalism regards as exceptional to it. To put this another way: liberals of both Left and Right can persuade themselves that they are obliged to resort to punitive or draconian measures because of the actions of others, an alterity so repellent that there is simply no choice but to suspend one’s own cherished precepts (of trial as the condition of assigning guilt, of the separation of powers, of the distinction between civil and military spaces, and so on) where these others are concerned. ‘They’ made ‘us’ do it by – and by being far too ‘they’ in the first place.

The particular measures of this ‘national emergency’ pronounce Victorian-era, protectionist understandings of sex, prostitution, children, disease and welfare directed toward accomplishing what over 200 years of colonisation has thus far failed to do. Under this ‘national emergency’, alcohol and x-rated pornography is to be banned, the permit system which restricts those who can enter communal lands will be abolished, conditions are to be placed on welfare payments (such as school attendance in areas which have teacher shortages or there are, literally, no schools), and communal title will be suspended through government seizure of land. At the time of writing, the Government announced it would also abolish the Community Development Employment Programme on the grounds that income from it went to buying alcohol. This means that some 7,000 people, who currently do low-paid work keeping stores open and removing rubbish, will be declared unemployed and expected to fulfill job search criteria, including perhaps having to move to areas where there is less unemployment. There is much, almost too much, that could be said about the derangement of liberalism that sees greater levels of impoverishment and suffering righteously tendered as the solution to already-unbearable levels of impoverishment and suffering.

But it remains to be noted that such delirium is occurring in the midst of the largest mining boom for decades, including an imminent expansion in uranium mining, and that many of these measures will undoubtedly produce significant movements of populations, whether as the effect of job-seeking conditions, to areas where it is legal to drink alcohol, or to places where welfare conditions regarding school attendance might be fulfilled.