Children of a dying race: the development story and governing through race

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Abstract

Late 19th century interest in new ideas about governing children, combined with the category of race as a core element of state formation, led to new interventions around children’s rights and limits to children’s life trajectories. This paper surveys public representations of early 20th century understandings of the ‘Aboriginal problem’ and notions of a ‘dying race’, and argues that this intellectual production underpins bio-political powers over the management and even continuance of the life of the child.

Keywords: Aboriginal child protection, ‘governing through rights’, evolutionary science, development story.

Governing through rights

Recent sociological literature argues that children’s rights discourse places limits on how normal childhood is conceptualised, and has certain disciplinary effects. Gadda notes, for example, that the development of childhood and children’s rights discourses need to be understood as the effects of power relations:

Although they seem to be liberating, they are in fact a way in which to keep control over subjects, i.e. children, parents, non-Western citizens. Control in this way is no longer exercised through repression, but through the stimulation of an ideal, i.e. childhood. (Gadda, 2008:19)

Commentaries in legal philosophy have also noted that a problem with contemporary human rights discourse is its professed universality (Rorty, 1992). On this theme, Foucault similarly observed that ‘it would be hypocritical or naïve to believe that the [system of rights] was made for all in the name of all…it would be more prudent to recognize that it was made for the few and that it was brought to bear on others’ (Foucault, 1979:276). The problems associated with universalizing children’s rights has been commented on recently by researchers working with children in a range of non-Western settings and the manner in which, in such settings, rights discourse may actively impede appropriate solutions to the immediate problems confronted by children: ‘(i)ntervention by people with preconceptions of the character of a “good childhood” in accord with which they would like to shape others’ experiences can cause unintended distress and disruption’ (Reynolds, et al., 2006: 292). In Australia the devastating impact of the removal of Indigenous children from their families on welfare grounds illustrates the destructive potential of administrative approaches predicated on universalist notions of childhood.
In the 19th century, children across the western world including those in settler societies became a focus of intense governing. With the decline of sovereign government and its replacement with liberal governing, sovereign power to ‘take life or let live’ was replaced by a power to ‘give life or let die’ (Foucault, 2004:247). This is a power quite separate from a disciplinary power that centred on individual bodies, producing individualising effects and rendering the body both useful and docile. The second technology is instead regulatory, centred not on the body but on life itself, bringing together mass effects characteristic of a population; it is a technology which tries to control random events and protect the security of the whole from internal dangers. In this technology bodies are replaced by ‘general biological processes’ (Foucault, 2004:247). Power would no longer take from the populace; instead population itself would become an object of government. It is this shift to bio-political power that laid the grounds for an intense interest in the government of children, of inquiring into their special capacities and vulnerabilities.

Following from Foucault, Wells (2011) argues that the rise of bio-politics was central to the production of sex/sexuality and race as the truth of the modern subject. New ideas about children propelled new and different claims for children’s rights to health, welfare and life needing to be governed, and their claims in this field made it a contested field. The modern rights-bearing child is thus seen as a product of the more recent shift to bio-politics rather than of the more traditional claims around rights as citizens or sovereign subjects. Childhood was conceptualised also as the emblematic site of a politics of life ‘because children are the quintessential site of development potential’ (Wells, 2011:22). Children were understood as unformed, mutable and able to be restored to proper developmental patterns. But importantly, bio-political power also placed limits on these restorable characteristics on the grounds of race. Indeed, as I show in the next section, Australian Aborigines were spoken of as a ‘child race’. So in cases of states marked by racial formations of government, such as settler societies, childhood became an important site of struggle over racial inequalities more generally. Wells argues that liberal rule sought justification for intervention on the grounds of securing the health and wealth of the population, but capitalism’s immanent inequality meant that governing always failed to achieve these outcomes:

> Its failure to do so is either transmuted, so that those who do not benefit from health/welfare are at fault, rather than the liberal state – a strategy of privatisation or individualisation – or justified through appealing to the different natures and therefore the different needs of different ‘kinds’ of people. (Wells, 2011:22)

The notion of ‘governing through rights’ thus can be relevant in understanding recent Australian government policies directed towards Aboriginal communities such as the Northern Territory Emergency response in 2007, and the subsequent 2012 Stronger Futures legislation. Justification for apparent ‘illiberal’ government interventions, such as quarantining welfare payments and government management of lands which would be unacceptable to the vast majority of the Australian population, is drawn from claims that the interventions are to protect children’s rights to health and welfare (Tedmanson and Wadiwel, 2010; Reynolds, 2010). Such events may be described as instances of ‘authoritarian liberalism’ (Hindess, 2001). It is in this sense that the liberal distinction between liberal and authoritarian rationalities of governing should be regarded as highly unstable (Dean, 2007: ...
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Freedom and ‘unfreedom’ protected in law are given normative content by specialist knowledges in these formally non-political domains of civil society, such as the various scientific knowledges of population and the characteristics of different sections of the population.

To understand the conditions of possibility for instances of authoritarian liberalism, such as the exercise of powers to control and manage the ‘bare life’ circumstances of remote Aboriginal peoples, we consider here the relations between governing and the knowledge of spheres in the population. This relates to the nineteenth century period of ‘evolutionism’ (Foucault, 2004:256). What follows is a rendition of the ‘Aboriginal problem’ in Australia during the first half of the 20th century, sometimes characterised as a shift away from ‘bloody frontier battles’ to more concerted attacks on Australian Indigenous cultural practices and forms of community life (Broome, 2005:185-206). The aim is to sketch a preliminary assessment of the contribution of this kind of intellectual production to the manner of governing Aboriginal people in general and Aboriginal children in particular. The survey takes place against a backdrop of Aboriginal ‘half-caste’ child removal and of contemporary views about white Europeans and their superior place in the hierarchy of races and civilisations.

‘Race’ science

From the early modern period, the slave trade, the subjugation and extermination of indigenous peoples, and ideologies of ‘Christians versus heathens’, shifted in the 19th century to notions of civilized Europeans versus uncivilized savages, particularly in conjunction with the rise of physical anthropology and evolutionary biology. As McCarthy (2009: 24) concludes, there was a continuous interplay between colonialism and racism. It is important to acknowledge the historical specificity of the translation of race science, and the local, practical engagement with the particular circumstances of the Australian colonial setting (Anderson, 2009). Scientific views of the superiority and inferiority of races became more prominent among the European settlers in Australia, as a rationale for ‘clearing away’ those referred to as ‘full bloods’. Evolutionary thought and accompanying theories about biological evolution were as startling in Australia as elsewhere in the world, and the implications of evolutionary theory for social policy were widely discussed and debated (Goodwin, 1964).

More recent attention to theories of population shows that 19th century evolutionary science accommodated a range of perspectives on the origins of Australian Aborigines and their likely destiny. There is evidence that environmentalism influenced early 19th century ethnographers’ views on the condition of Aboriginal people, indicating that their supposed lack of sophistication and civilization was due to the inadequacies of their environment. Towards the end of the century the view that Aborigines were different in their ‘natural’ capacities and were remnants of an about-to-be extinct race became more prominent (Hindess, 2001: 103). Much of the focus of scientific attention was on the origins and significance of racial differences in Indigenous people as these might affect the future of the ‘white race’ in the new settlement in Australia. In the lead-up to World War 1, many scientists were convinced that Aborigines were the remnants of an earlier invasion which had
either eliminated or absorbed the first inhabitants. This provided them with the groundwork on which to speculate about the white race in the antipodes. Anderson (2002) observes that the doctors who were drawn to Aboriginal studies were more interested in discerning racial types and tracing human genealogies than recording the ‘pathophysiological mechanism’ that led to Aboriginal deaths after contact with the white invader. What was largely missing from the scope of scientific interest was the effects of governance practices on the health of Aboriginal peoples, so that rising morbidity and mortality rates among these populations often served to confirm Enlightenment presuppositions about inferior, ‘doomed’ races and the elevated position of Europeans in the ‘development story’ of civilisations.

**The developmental story in public discourse**

We pick up the story in Queensland at the turn of the century, as the Anglican church reviews its mission work and its adaptation to colonial conditions, which covered the ‘heathen races’ of the Western Pacific and well as the Aborigines of Australia and New Zealand: ‘we are sure that, as the backs die out, and our treatment of them becomes only a memory, these and similar efforts by other Churches will stand out to our vision with increasingly happy relief against the dark historic background’ (*The Brisbane Courier*, 3/8/1900, p.4). The account clearly constructs a relationship between the decline or death of one race and a corresponding strengthening of the superior race. So the missionary effort, while ultimately unsuccessful in ‘saving the race’, had nevertheless strengthened and ennobled the British:

It has been said that the British peoples in these Southern seas are of more consequence than all the native races put together. Be it so. The British peoples will strengthen and ennoble themselves by nothing so much as their unselfish toll for the child races cast upon their care. The materialism which would evade the ‘white man’s burden’ is the crassest folly. (*The Brisbane Courier*, 3/8/1900, p.4).

In Western Australia, the Roth Royal Commission Report findings received considerable newspaper attention. For Roth, the ‘white man’s burden’ now focused on two main issues - the administration of justice and the prostitution of ‘native women’. The first focused on the practice of ‘chaining natives by the neck’ when they were held in custody. Substantial monetary allowances were paid to police for prisoners’ upkeep which according to Roth accounted for ‘the large numbers of Aborigines kept in police custody for as long as possible’. At base, this was a problem of race. Roth reported: ‘with regard to long sentences passed upon native prisoners, they are not considered beneficial. The blacks are far better in their uncivilized than semi-civilised state, and are a great deal of trouble after they come out of gaol’ (*The Western Mail*, 4/2/1905, p.32). The continuing motif identified here is that in the struggle for life within populations the weaker race will not survive, but this in the end will further strengthen the stronger race. Foucault considered these elements still in the context of war: of destroying an enemy race and ‘destroying that sort of biological threat that those people over there represent to our race’ (Foucault, 2004:257).

Discussion of eugenics appeared in newspaper commentary early in the century, insisting on the need for public awareness of science as a way of improving the human species. The

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1 This section reflects the language used in the archival sources, and have not been noted with a *sic*.
Adelaide Advertiser (12/3/1910, p.12) spoke of ‘uncivilised as well as civilised peoples’ using practices to safeguard against ‘racial deterioration…underlying factors in the strange social organization of the aborigines of this continent with their totemic restrictions of what passes for marriage’. Unconfirmed reports of eugenic schemes appeared later in the century: the Sydney Morning Herald (30/6/1934, p.12) quoted Victorian MHR Mr Holloway’s claim in the Federal Parliament that anthropologists had discovered that the Australian Aboriginal is the ‘only species of the human race that will not throw back’, and that Dr Cook, Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, wanted to prove this ‘eugenic theory’. Holloway said Dr Cook was determined to have all ‘half-caste’ women married to white men ‘…and thus solve the half-caste problem…they tell me that men cannot obtain employment unless they agree to marry half-caste women…if Dr Cook is endeavoring to carry out such a policy he ought to be stopped’ (Sydney Morning Herald, 30/6/1934, p.12). A month later, Holloway repeated his claims. This time, the Melbourne Argus newspaper carried the story with the title ‘White Men and Half-Castes – No Experiment in Eugenics’, in which the Minister for the Interior again denied statements that the Northern Territory Protector of Aborigines Dr Cook was using his influence to compel white men to marry half-caste women (The Argus, 3 8/1934, p.7). Generally, race was spoken about in terms of blood and skin colour, as Director of the Queensland Museum Herbert Longman put it in 1927: ‘The long record of civilization showed a succession of dominant peoples. The virile white Northern European or Nordic race probably owed much to an infusion of blood and culture from the Mediterranean, that remarkable centre of early progress’ (The Queenslander, 28/4/1927, p.18).

At the 1926 Perth congress of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, F. Wood Jones claimed it was useless to try to administer Australia for the benefit of ‘the aboriginal’, as had been done in other lands ‘since he was not capable of taking advantage of the civilising influences of Anglo-Saxon rule’ (Sydney Morning Herald, 26/8/1926, p.10):

Nevertheless there was a debt. They had doomed him to lingering and certain death, wherever they had come into prolonged contact with him. If the aboriginal had not thrived so well on religions dogmas, or on alcohol, cast-off garments, and venereal disease, as on the exercise of his own pursuits in his own hunting ground, the fault was his. He had misused blessings, or had been too low in the scale of humanity to take advantage of them. (Sydney Morning Herald, 26/8/1926, p.10)

Professor Wood’s conclusions on the ‘doom of the aboriginal’ were based on the proposition that ‘aboriginal man’ had been taught ‘civilisation and Christianity’ for long enough to show that:

white civilisation and continued existence were incompatible where the aboriginal was concerned. One generation of contact was enough to seal his fate... It was impossible that the aboriginal would ever live as a healthy, helpful race…the only way he could be saved was to establish properly organized and properly administered reserves (Sydney Morning Herald, 26/8/1926, p.10).

A letter writer to the Sydney Morning Herald (26/4/1928, p.6) pointed to current Aboriginal protests against being ejected from the La Perouse reserve (‘the apex of our greed’) and the attempt by a union in Port Darwin to prohibit employment of Aborigines in mines and stations (‘a severe commentary on the unions and their methods’). The writer observed that
Australia supported sanctuaries for birds and animals – ‘we have dogs homes, horses homes, cats homes, but no homes for aborigines – none that is secure’:

One is told that they are so inferior a race that they are not to be considered…And the plea that they are so inferior is but another proof of our arrogance. The Australian aborigine certainly lives and thinks on a different plane than do the white races. But that is not necessarily proof of inferiority. In their unspoiled state they have as high a code of honour as we have, and certainly keep it more strictly than do most white people. (Sydney Morning Herald, 26/4/1928, p.6)

In a similar vein, the Brisbane Courier ran a story titled ‘Superiority Complex and the Colour Complex’ (2/1/1929, p.21) in which the author, Llewellyn Lucas, described an epidemic of ‘idealising the dark-skinned races…either it is a fashion for a mild humanitarianism – a patting of the clever dog on the head - or it is a significant surge showing a turn in the great racial tides’. Lucas recounted the ‘terrible war over the negroes’ in America which had ‘spilled much “white” blood’:

there is perhaps no reason why the white race should maintain its supremacy, or why all the races might not in time merge, but the Australian aboriginal is surely a relic of the past, to be treated kindly and humanly, like a child, and protected from degenerate whites by law. (Brisbane Courier, 2/1/1929, p.21)

**Conclusion**

In attempts to govern Aboriginal families and children, the nineteenth century problem of population became an important object of knowledge. The science of race entered the room of governing, and was required to provide an assessment of ‘the Aboriginal problem’ and the limited scope for freedom and rights of that part of the population. The interpretations were contested, but nevertheless require us to take seriously the evidence of the governing actions of science itself as a definer of normal life, normal growing up, and also a corollary, the legal determinations of normal families and the normal childhood Governing children would require, forcefully if necessary, acknowledgment of the ‘truth’ of the biological caesura that defined these limits.

**References**


