

THE LINGERING INFECTION OF TERRA NULLIUS

Everybody is familiar with the term 'Terra Nullius'. Australia was purportedly owned by no-one and the British used the term to justify colonisation. Nowadays, almost everyone rejects the validity of this notion, but very few of us really understand its full implications. We remain essentially unaware of how Terra Nullius still insidiously and unconsciously influences our thinking.

Aboriginal people hate the term Terra Nullius with a passion, and rightly so, because it strongly implies that Aboriginal people had a vacuous culture and achieved nothing. After all, they were just a primitive bunch of people wandering around bumping into trees. They did not use the land, had not even invented the wheel, and their only technological achievement was a bent stick that came back when you threw it.

Aboriginal people did of course cultivate the land, but not in the intensive, exploitative and unsustainable way that most other world cultures did. All Aboriginal knowledge was integrated through the totem system to ultimately serve ecological purposes. So whether it was knowledge related to science, art or religion, it was all focussed on ecological outcomes. Even the nursery rhymes sung to little children had an ecological message.

Think of all the descriptors usually applied to traditional Aboriginal society. Words like simple, primitive, pagan, uncivilized, nomadic, stone-age, hunter-gatherers. These are all pejorative terms that put western civilisation at the highest level and Aboriginal society at the lowest level. Never mind that western society has over the last 3000 years had a history of internecine war, conquest, rolling plagues, overpopulation, social inequality, gross disparities of wealth and poverty, plus religious and political persecution.

Aboriginal society had none of this, but ironically the sustained warfare of European and Asian history created the spur for technological achievement. This technological advancement is then taken as a sign of a 'higher' civilization. Darwin put forward the idea of natural selection and this was immediately seen as a justification for western conquest and colonisation of others. It was simply '*Survival of the Fittest*' in action.

Many world cultures are so inured by their histories of warfare, that it is regarded as part of human nature. Many people therefore flatly refuse to believe there were never any wars of conquest or invasion in Aboriginal Australia. The proof that there were no wars of conquest is simple. Show me one myth, story, legend, dance or song from anywhere in Australia that depicts either the victories of a warrior king, the subjugation and enslavement of others, or an uprising against a despotic ruler. It just never happened.

The real problem is that spurious notions like this have seeped into our consciousness and we do not know how to challenge these received wisdoms. This is the foundation of ***Institutional Racism***, the process by which prejudicial ideas are ingrained into present day social perceptions. However this should not be interpreted as meaning that Australians are racist. Australians are overwhelmingly fair minded people who meet and greet people as equals. This is the cornerstone of our national culture. But what we fail to understand is how the prejudices of our forefathers continue to unwittingly shape our thinking.

The idea of Terra Nullius is in fact behind our inability to recognise a road or highway we are travelling on as an ancient Songline. It is behind our inability to recognise a river rapids area, like at Warrandyte township, as an original site for fish traps or a mussel farm. It is also the reason why many historians make blatant errors when they try to interpret Aboriginal behaviours. Their assumptions are often unconsciously based on ideas of European superiority.

Before giving a classic example of this fallacious thinking I will cite two facts. First, Aboriginal people had ingrained cultural habits of listening and sound replication that made them gifted linguists. All Aboriginal children were brought up multilingual. Second, Aboriginal people travelled extensively and safely through other tribal areas as long as you stuck to the designated Songline and observed proper protocol.

However, when Aboriginal people tried to communicate these protocols to early colonists, it was wrongly assumed that Aboriginal people were frightened to leave their own country. In 2008 the AFL historian dismissed the possibility of any connection between Marngrook and Australian Football with the comment: '*Aborigines...lived within quite clearly defined tribal areas, speaking a language different from those of other tribal areas. Aboriginal tribal strangers were regarded with suspicion and did not trespass without being killed.*'

This comment clearly painted Aboriginal people as a simple, primitive, xenophobic and violent bunch. Its roots were clearly embedded in the notion of Terra Nullius. The comment is a glowing example of ***institutional racism*** by an historian who claims for herself the highest standards of academic scholarship. Unfortunately it is just one of many examples of the lingering infection of Terra Nullius.