Rationality, Ideological Transfer, Cultural Resistance, and the Dreaming

The Development of Political Thought in Australian Aboriginal Society

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Abstract. – The paper discusses the development of political thought in Australian Aboriginal society. In the beginning of contact with western civilization this development was impeded by conservative ideological and religious doctrines and forces in Aboriginal society. Later it gained momentum and moving political thought through various phases was informed by a distinct process of rationalization. As Aboriginal thought through ideological transfer adopted western political and epistemic paradigms and adapted to the western dominated political arena, it began to engage, in various forms, in a dialogue with the Australian legal and political system. Rationalization, however, is not tantamount to westernization and cannot be expected to entail the total loss of traditional culture. Through renewal and even innovation traditional culture is being successfully adapted and strengthened, ensuring its long-term survival and continuing vigour. It is being increasingly marshalled now as a political statement of some import. Its skillful deployment in Australian society today is just another expression and result of the process of rationalization. *[Australia, Aboriginal society, religion, rationalization, chiliasm, cultural renewal, politicization of culture]*

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In 1988, the Australian nation celebrated the bicentennial of its existence, established in January of the fateful year of 1788 when the so-called first fleet arrived from Britain on the shores of this new land and staked its claim. While the world through the newsmedia was watching the festive proceedings, it also caught a glimpse of a reality barely known abroad: expressions of grave discontent among the indigenous population. While Australia indulged in lavish extravaganzas, Aborigines took to the streets so the world could glimpse something of the flipside of Australian society. I shall not review or describe these expressions, nor do I analyse the social and political conditions which have given rise to them. Doing so would only mean providing the backdrop to my real purpose: the analysis of the political thought of which these events were one of the latest expressions.

Following the annexation of the Australian continent, in 1788, by the British Crown, Aborigines had been subjected to the strategies and effects of colonialism in various forms. Most incisively, British law, informed by Hobbes' and Locke's philosophy, did not acknowledge landownership by indigenous people such as the Australian Aborigines who showed no evidence of investing their labour in cultivating the land or in forming fixed settlements in accord with "the divine command to subdue the earth." The horrendous injustice arising from the recognition of land title only on such restricted terms, has had to wait until early in 1992, fundamentally to be addressed by a decision of the Australian High Court – more than two hundred years after its fateful first implementation. The so-called Murray Island High Court ruling (also known as Mabo case after the principal claimant), following a ten years legal battle, recognizes the Torres Strait islanders as indigenous owners of Mer or Murray Island (some 50 km from Cape York) and effectively overturns the legal justification of the appropriation of Aboriginal land as terra nullius in the 18th century.

The treatment of Aborigines by official policies has been called Australia's internal colonialism, and latterly welfare colonialism. Early policies, stated or unstated, included rolling Aboriginal occupation back from desirable areas, enforced sedentarization and "pacification" by force. Later, in this century, policies ranged from benign neglect to enforced assimilation and attempted absorption of Aborigines into mainstream Australian society (for instance, by removing half-caste children from their Aboriginal parents, to bring them up in institutions). In the 1960s, the policy of integration emerged based on a more limited notion of assimilation combined with the accommodation of a certain degree of cultural separateness. As authoritarian and excessively paternalistic views have retreated in recent years, there is now an