RESEARCH ESSAY

Assignment 2

INS10001

Colonialism remains the dominant social paradigm in Australian society today, casting Indigenous cultures on the periphery of the mainstream.

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As an individualist colonised nation, contemporary Australian society measures success and social status through the embedded capitalist ideologies brought ashore by British arrivals. As a result of this colonialism, the social and economic perceptions of Indigenous Australians and their culture are undervalued and reduced to a subculture that remains on the periphery of society. This essay explores the contrasting cultures of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and how Australia's colonial past has had long reaching effects on contemporary society and its culture through policy decisions, the homogenising of Indigenous recognition and the collision of individualism and collectivism. Central to this argument is how capitalism has shaped Australia's perceptions of success and served to define contemporary Australia as a nation of individualist free market competitors, casting to the periphery cultures that do not conform to this economic ideology.

Modern Australia was built and shaped from the colonial acquisition of British imperial troops. The 17th century saw an increase in European mariners exploring the waters around Australia. Many of them made contact with Indigenous groups, but it was Captain James Cook who, on the orders of King George III arrived and claimed the east coast of Australia (Jalata 2013, p. 5). The swift acquisition of native land through the declaration of tera nullius, Latin for 'land belonging to no one' (Parbury 1999, p. 102), meant the British Empire had succeeded in claiming another part of the globe with the intention of colonising it to expand its authority, political hegemony, and cultural dominance. Cook deemed the land as in a pure state of nature, with the Indigenous inhabitants having no connection to it, as perceived by their lack of fixed habitation. These imperial Western European assumptions that led to land being stolen created the foundations of colonial conquest that has affected Indigenous Australian's way of life to this very day. Therefore, it can be argued that colonialism in the Australian context can be summarised as the act of the imperial British Empire's cultural, economic, and political hegemony being extended without consideration to the lands' original inhabitants, destroying lived cultures and "emptying the metaphorical native brain of all content" (Ziltener & Künzler 2013, p. 302), to replace it with Christianity and market capitalism as economic, cultural, and social paradigms.

Capitalism is a defining and dominant structure of the colonial state and shapes societies perceptions of life and labour. To discuss colonialism without capitalism seems illogical, for the two

are intertwined and connected through imperialism and the rise of the European industrial revolution. Although early colonial Australia was not the capitalist nation known today, the hallmark features of this economic ideology was brought ashore with the First Fleet, through forced labour and privatisation of land. A concept lost on the free-flowing Indigenous peoples, who moved around depending on food and water supply, therefore without a permanent settlement. Capitalism today can be described as the dominant global economic system, focused on modes of production, competition, and free market access with little state interference. Its winner takes all model promotes competition at the cost of others and has over time produced a culture of work, particularly how hard and how long you work associated to a human's usefulness to society. Sociologist Max Weber described this work ethic as the 'protestant ethic'; an important factor of economic success in the early stages of European capitalism, where worldly success could equate to one's heavenly riches in time (Weber 2014, p. 23). Success in a capitalist state is wealth, fame, property, notoriety, and academic acknowledgement as highlighted by Gunditjamara man, Richard Frankland who in his letter to John Howard wrote that Australia is home if you are part of the dominant culture, but hard to be accepted if you are not in a defined successful category (Frankland 2009). It is clear then that this dominant view of individual success, hard work and usefulness is a long-lasting colonial structure that is at the core of contemporary society, with alternative cultural approaches cast to the periphery.

The exclusion of Indigenous natives in the Constitution has rippled into many racist and exclusive government policies that have sought to dismantle or destroy Indigenous cultures. A major aspect of colonialism is the total replacement of any existing political system with that of a stronger power, in Australia's case, the Westminster system. From the moment terra nullius was declared, British colonists began enacting policies that would continually assert a cultural dominance over Indigenous natives and serve as the yard stick that would continue to push them further from the central ruling hegemon to the periphery of society. Denial, disqualification, and severe socio-economic disadvantage have been arguably the most profound and devastating consequences of Indigenous exclusion from the Constitution. 'The people' under which this document was created, relevant to this day, are central to representative government (Arcioni 2012, p. 288), meaning throughout Australia's modern history, governments are failing to address the apex of the issue of the exclusion of Indigenous Australians as 'the people' and to this day are vulnerable at any stage to legal racial exclusion. Furthermore, the policies that followed: protection, assimilation and multiculturalism have all sought to destroy, control, omit or alter Indigenous lives and cultures (Mulcahy 2017), keeping them separate and to an extent, reducing them to a tokenistic subculture,

celebrated on the national stage at sporting events or international tourism campaigns, but daily still far from mainstream norms. Even when these policies seek to reunite the marginalized, the control originates from the central hegemony of colonised government.

Closing the gap of inequality is governed by targets influenced by colonial ideals of well-being and success. Since 2008, each government has committed to closing the gap of inequality in areas of health, life expectancy, education, and employment; gaps that have been created by the states own hand. However, critically, these commitments are reliant on political ideology and therefore are subject to funding cuts or divergence (Deravin et al. 2018, p. 480). While it is imperative that governments strive to attain and reach these targets, particularly in areas of health and wellbeing, one critical view of these targets is the undeniable measurement of Western values these policies hold. In a 2017 address to the House of Representatives, former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull concluded the Closing the Gap report by vowing to tell stories of Indigenous Australian scientists, lawyers, nurses, and accountants, as these accounts are markers of progress (Parliament of Australia 2017). As paramount as this is to enhance Indigenous narratives of success, the messaging is clear: academic and economic success is progress, and Indigenous Australians must catch up to these Western standards in order to enhance, rather than non-Indigenous Australians adopting the cultures and values of shared communities, kinship, and spiritual connection to enhance their way of life. It can be argued that from a sociological viewpoint, governments work to close the gap of inequality by closing the gap on culture, as this is treated as the weakest link to disadvantage and poverty. To truly grasp the influence of the dominant social paradigm of Western cultures on Indigenous Australians, is to review the achievements celebrated on the National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee week (NAIDOC 2020), where many Indigenous winners achieved academic and professional success in areas of law, music, and sport. This certainly is in keeping with Frankland's (2009) lamentations on Indigenous acceptance and success measured according to the dominant culture's values and perceptions.

The collision of individualism and collectivism, as two contrasting cultures existing among modern non-Indigenous Australians and Indigenous Australians remains a key aspect of contention. Individualism is a characteristic of western society and a hallmark of European social and economic history. The rise of capitalism emphasised the role of the individual as a primary source of value and sees competition, independence, and self-reliance as positive social traits. Contrastingly, Indigenous collectivist cultures place great emphasis on the group as a source of value, and do not regard

individuals as isolated but part of the larger group. Therefore, they are greatly dependent, value hierarchy and are bound to duty rather than individual pleasure seeking (Berry 1997, p. 6). From these working definitions, it can be argued that in contemporary Australia, a capitalist country whose own motto of "the great Australian dream" denotes the liberal ideology of home ownership as the ultimate success, is at vast odds with its original culture that predates invasion thousands of years and promotes kinship, family, and connection to land and water as measures of happiness and success (Behrendt 2015). Non-Indigenous Australians need for economic success is not only deeply embedded in their social psyche, but also required to maintain the way of life and social strata they are familiar with. The notion of group dependency, immaterial worth and a wealth counted in knowledge and experience, rather than dollar value and academic achievement is lost on individualists, who value immediate family security, freedom, and success (Fogarty 1994, p. 401). Non-Indigenous Australians have little or no connection to land and it is culturally viewed as a material asset for farming or to exploit resources from (Miller 2018). The detonation of Juukan Gorge in the Pilbara region, which saw 46,000-year-old rock shelters destroyed by mining juggernaut Rio Tinto is an example of this total disregard for the land, culture, and the Dreamtime of traditional owners (Stanley & Gudgeon 2020), and the mediocre furore from media outlets only serves to highlight the total lack of understanding of any culture that is not the dominant Western one.

Post-colonialism has made way for Indigenous Australians to achieve equity in opportunity and equality in society, and see its history and culture woven into Australian identity, but it remains on dominant Western terms. Post-colonialism is the continuing cultural effects of a nation that has been colonised, and further, its attempts to reclaim or revisit its history and narrative to legitimise a new authentic culture, separate from its colonised past (Mulcahy 2017). However, Australia is still a state that still falls under the rule of British sovereignty, and therefore the reimagination of its national identity remains limited to Western values however congenial it has become to the majority. Many believe post-colonialism has created pathways for Indigenous groups to regain autonomy and control through greater opportunities to participate in society. However, one third of Indigenous Australians reside in remote or very remote areas of Australia, where employment and Western standards of advancement are limited (Taylor 2011, p. 291), further emphasising the attitudes of the ruling class and society at large, that opportunities are only available to urbanised Indigenous Australians in larger towns and cities. One positive aspect of post-colonialism is Indigenous nationalism and activism that has led to the reclamation of native sovereignty. Landmark cases like Mabo began a time of colonial resistance for Indigenous groups, and a re-education for many citizens who had only ever known one narrative (Norman 2015, p. 29). The focus on bettering

Indigenous education levels, although previously criticised in this essay by its Western cultural standards, are also undeniably vital for Indigenous Australians to advance in shaping contemporary society and how it understands its history. Indigenous academics can re-examine the history, note the flaws and the unbalanced accounts, and re-tell these stories to non-Indigenous Australians (Peters 2017, p. 53). It is through these voices Australia can reimagine and reconstruct itself post-colonially, rather than these narratives being centrally constructed and disseminated by the ruling hegemon of modern government.

This essay has discussed how colonialism has shaped Australia and its national identity to one that reflects Anglo European cultures and values as the dominant social paradigm, therefore casting Indigenous cultures and values to the periphery of society. Terra nullius and the omission of native owners in the Australian constitution remain to be the catalyst to generations of inequality, and despite efforts to 'close the gap', policies are still dominated and reliant on government ideologies and structure. Capitalism and the economic ideologies that define individualist success and status have defined a dominant way of life, overshadowing Indigenous values of kinship, land connection and collectivist unity, and although society has shifted over the latter part of the century to a somewhat post-colonial British colony that is beginning to embrace Indigenous history and cultures, British sovereignty remains central in dominating social paradigms. Australia should do more to assert itself as an independent state by further integrating Indigenous history and culture into contemporary society, which starts with the constitution being amended. Australia as a nation has far to go, but with Indigenous voices strengthening and non-Indigenous voices supporting, it is possible to change.

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