

Peter Sutton: The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the End of the Liberal Consensus. Melbourne University Press, 2009. \$34.99, pb. 978 0 522 85636 1.
Reviewd by Adi Wimmer, Klagenfurt.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. (English proverb)

In 2003 I attended an Australian Studies conference in Portugal where Xavier Pons, former president of EASA and a distinguished scholar gave a paper with the apparently provocative title "Who Cares for the Aborigine?" (The general theme of the conference was "Australia: Who Cares?") In it, he dared suggest that certain problems in Australia's indigenous communities were home-made, like substance abuse. And then he also mentioned rumours of sexual abuses in those communities which often are a by-product. There were some astonishing responses from the audience. An academic from Perth expressed "extreme discomfort" at merely hearing such reproaches, an Aboriginal academic of UNSW said that all such rumours were "lies created by white racists", another academic later wrote to the EASA board (of which I was a member at the time) suggesting that the organization should make a public apology for Professor Pons's paper, and should carefully vet all future papers with an Aboriginal content, eliminating all those that were "disrespectful" of Aboriginal culture. Only that which was "empowering" of that culture should be given a platform.

One year later *The Australian* (and later, all other newspapers) reported that a social worker had resigned in protest from her job because of the many cases of sexual child abuse in her community, as well as wife bashing, that were blithely ignored by the ruling elders. Indeed, so she reported, one of these "elders" was a child abuser himself. When she confronted the elders she was told that if she dared report what she knew, she would be fired. The procedure that always worked, so she learnt, was to accuse any whistle-blower of "cultural insensitivity" and of having "racist views." The state department of Aboriginal Affairs would always take the side of the

elders. Her admission opened the floodgates of reporting on systemic sexual abuse in indigenous communities, and for months the matter was the main public discourse in Australia. In 2007 that discourse flared up again after a particularly infamous case of child gang-rape in the community of Aurukun. Since nothing of substance had changed in the preceding three years, the Howard administration gave in to strong media pressure and took the drastic measure of sending police and army personnel into the self-governed communities to stop the abuses. This was called "The Intervention" and it had bi-partisan Canberra support but was virulently attacked by white liberals and some, but not all, Aboriginal leaders. (The major 'defections' from the denial camp were Marcia Langton, who wrote a preface to Peter Sutton's study, and Noel Pearson, Director of the Cape York Institute, who is at present the most prominent Aboriginal figure in Australia.) Simultaneous to it, several official reports were published, the most substantial being the "Little Children are Sacred" Report by the Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse. It was established on 8 August 2006 and its final report was published 15 July 2007.¹¹ The points made by the Inquiry were that "Child sexual abuse is serious, widespread and often unreported" and that

the combined effects of poor health, alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment, gambling, pornography, poor education and housing, and a general loss of identity and control have contributed to violence and to sexual abuse in many forms.

The study concluded that "sexual abuse of Aboriginal children is happening largely because of the breakdown of Aboriginal culture and society."

Why this long introduction to a study by an anthropologist on a contemporary indigenous problem? Because Sutton's study focuses on how liberals (academics, artists, "bleeding-heart" activists and others) caused systematic censorship on what really went on, which resulted in "poor policy evolution" and finally a "dissemination of

¹ http://inquirysaac.nt.gov.au/report_summary.html

disinformation in Australian Indigenous affairs" (13). A key factor in all of this was the wide-spread implementation of the so-called "ethics code" in the 1990s, a code requiring all researches in Aboriginal Studies to agree to censorship or, better still, self-censorship. Sutton's concern, as he writes, is with

the corrosive effect of ideological politics, or even merely white post-imperial guilt politics, on our ability to respond realistically and truthfully to the enduring crisis states so many Indigenous individuals continue to suffer (13).

In other words, political correctness has blighted the discourses of Aboriginality and has been responsible for hundreds of rape cases, hundreds of sexual child abuse cases. Hundreds? Yes indeed, a report in *The Australian* of November 2009 gave the number of newly opened court cases against abusive Aboriginal men in the Northern Territory as 847. Not that Sutton gives this 'pc' camp a kid-glove treatment: he is scathing about academics who bathe in the warm sense of moral superiority, who glory to be on the side of the suppressed, who will trumpet their anti-racism from the citadels of academe. But who will not allow the truth to come into the way of self-righteousness. In one passage Sutton can barely conceal his contempt for those activists preferring to pursue wild claims for compensation (calling them "increasingly stratospheric rights and international covenants", 12) rather than paying the slightest attention to the protection of brutalized wives and children.

In an interview Sutton explained that he had "been driven into action by grief more than anything else."² It is the same introduction that Louise Nowra gave us for his heart-breaking study *Bad Dreaming*.

Aboriginal men's violence against women and children. I find it interesting that both authors had to claim first-hand knowledge of how indigenous communities had degenerated into booze and violence, had to present friends who were lost to it, before daring to present a critique. Such has been the pressure of liberal activists in Australia that any critics of Aboriginal matters were told to shut up

² Ian Anderson. "Driven into Action". <http://inside.org.au/driven-into-action/>. 23 September 2009.

and to stay out. Even Sutton does not offer recommendations on how to fix the malaise.

The question that keeps bumping around in my head is why it took so long to address those ills? Sutton gave a paper with the same title as the book before a conference of anthropologists already in 2000, and his paper was published in 2001. No-one took a blind bit of notice. Everyone I know in Australia who has had only a small interest in Aboriginal matters has told me that rumours of the breakdown in Aboriginal communities were afoot already in the 1990s; cases of sexual abuse or wife bashing were known but not considered important enough to alert the public. Inga Clendinnen (2009) admits that she behaved no differently: "we would read, click our tongues and get on with our lives". But such behaviour is at odds with what we consider our hallowed duties. The academic consensus is that we have not only a right but a responsibility to speak out against wrongs; we "interfere", we "take action". Maybe this is very strongly the case in Germany and Austria; during the Nazi years academics stayed aloof and did nothing to stop the creeping barbarism in our culture and so we consider such a stance morally binding. But the same academics (and some of them are right here in my own country) who demand we collectively shoulder such responsibilities, most particularly and passionately those that will benefit women's rights, will propound the right of Aboriginal men to "settle their own affairs", free from "white interference". The underside of such non-interference was the untold suffering of women and children.

In 1937 George Orwell returned from the Catalan front of the Spanish civil war where he had witnessed the Stalinist repression of anarchists who were, like their murderers, fighting against Franco. He wished to publish an article about it in the *New Statesman* whose editor Kingsley Martin denied him the opportunity. It would be "playing into the hands of the enemy" was his reasoning. That is exactly what Australia's liberals also did when they heard of systemic sexual abuses in Aboriginal communities. To suppress the truth is the same as to lie; Sutton decided not to lie any longer. No

coincidence that Inga Clendinnen, Australia's most famous essayist, titled her review of Sutton's study "Truth tellers take charge".

I do not wish to create the impression that Sutton is critical of indigenous culture or even of indigenous daily practices. Far from it: even when he reports how a close friend killed his wife (after hours of drinking) does he praise the ability of the families to defuse the conflict: "Wik people move with practiced smootheness into crisis events. Everyone seemed to know what to do" (88). Unlike Louis Nowra, whose study he calls "negative" and "in places badly misinformed" he does not denigrate indigenous communities for their sliding into degeneracy. He blames the white community first for implementing a flawed policy of self-determination and then for not reacting when that policy was producing criminal results. He is most decidedly on the side of indigeneity when discussing the "Reconciliation" process, with which he finds a lot of fault. The respective chapter "On feeling reconciled" is not easy to read, though. Sutton is clearly supportive of Kevin Rudd's "Apology" of February 2008, but dismisses its effectiveness. It was all good for whitefellas, is his verdict, who wanted to be forgiven. But he is equally dismissive of the radicals who with renewed vigour pursue the quest for a treaty and billions of dollars of compensation: "it would be a serious mistake to assume that all Aboriginal people believe a signed document to mean anything significant" (199). At the end of this chapter I had the impression that Sutton did not know himself what should have taken place instead of the Reconciliation process.

Sutton's chapter on "Violence, ancient and Modern" is the longest; here Sutton presents valuable anthropological new research. Pre-contact Aboriginal Culture was more violent than even the early racist colonists reported, a subject that became taboo in the liberal discourse. An investigation of app. 1.200 archeological skulls unearthed all over Australia revealed that 24% exhibited trauma. The percentages varied: in one S.A. site the percentage was 44% for women and 9% for men, so clearly there had been a culture of hitting women on the head. The evidence from 350 British skulls of

the Neolithic period showed only 2% skull fractures, as did an investigation located in Central America.

Mitchell Rolls (first essay in this issue) convincingly argues that it was never a case of “why weren’t we told” (thus the title of one of Henry Reynolds’s studies) but “why didn’t we listen?” He is spot-on with this assessment. It is inconceivable that Henry Reynolds was shielded from the bad reports; he, like most of his followers, made a moral choice not to upset the failed policies that liberals like him had put into place. “Sorry is the hardest thing to say”, in the words of an American pop song. To change that policy would have been to admit that the romanticized views on Aboriginal culture were in need of overhaul, and that their presentation of Aboriginal men as perennial victims was unsustainable.

Works cited:

Clendinnen, Inga, 2009: “Truth-tellers take charge.” *The Australian literary review*, July 1, 2009, 12-13

Nowra, Louis, 2007. *Bad dreaming. Aboriginal men’s violence against women and children*. Melbourne: Pluto Press.