THE POLITICS OF ETHNICITY IN SETTLER SOCIETIES

States of Unease

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To the memory of Charlotte, and for John

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Introduction

Many nations are currently exhibiting states of unease. In the European Old World, to recoin a phrase whose currency, quite literally, is in the process of being revolutionised, states are said to be suffering from recurring crises as the boundaries of identity – personal, national and global – are radically transformed. Yet, in New World societies, these upheavals have added twists, only partly attributable to the changing relations between conceptually dubious elderly and youthful nation-states.

Not so long ago Chinese men who came to dig for gold in Australasia or wield a pick and shovel on the Canadian railroad were subject to harsh immigration controls and the opprobrium of lowly esteemed 'race aliens'. Racism has hardly disappeared today, as a glance at Brisbane, Vancouver or Auckland newspapers will reveal, but the headlined anger or anxiety is directed at new Asian migrants, as likely to be Hong Kong or Taiwanese professionals or investors as South East Asian refugees.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Indians, Aborigines and Maori were viewed as 'dying races'. A fate greeted with indifference, relief and the occasional spark of sadness among white settlers or their descendants. They saw the indigenes as 'a problem' rather than a threat, although in many parts of their countries, particularly the cities, they did not see them at all, unless one ventured into slum areas or viewed depictions of them and their cultures in museums. Nowadays, in much of North America and the Pacific, aboriginal peoples are still peripheral populations, but, politically speaking, they have come 'out of the margins'. Despite their small numbers aboriginal peoples have become a potent powerful force. Their renewed demands for material reparation and political autonomy strike at the very heart of 'traditional' conceptions of state sovereignty, while their recognition as 'first nations' give them

a prominent position in public iconography and within the recast foundational myths of majorities in post-settler states.

Changes in, mainly post-Second World War, immigration patterns and the self-determinative politics of aboriginality are vital sources of unease in post-settler societies, with Canadians having the additional *frisson* of relations with Quebec. Status anxiety among dominant elites, the 'chattering classes', and possibly the masses, are also attributable to twentieth-century shifts in geopolitics. Groups that once saw themselves as epitomes of 'Britishness' within the Empire have seen the mother country slip down the league of imperial teams; while the United States, once seen, at least through British eyes, as an upstart colony in the settler stakes, seeks to retain its exceptionalism in power terms at the head of the medal table. Rearrangements in the rise and fall of nation-states have coincided with other forces from within and without that threaten the idea of independent states with neat boundaries of identity.

Since the Second World War the internationalisation of labour and capital has been striking, although one can hardly argue that money and workers, paid or unpaid, were not transportable in earlier eras. Transnational corporations are now more important game players than many nation-states in an increasingly integrated world market with an international division of labour. Massive innovations in technology have globalised information systems and transformed population movements. Immigration officers can retrieve information about arrivals by pressing a few keys. State policy makers and members of ethnic associations affected by such policies can confer with one another and their counterparts in other nation-states by E-mail. Images of carefully orchestrated or spontaneous 'ethno dramas', reflecting the clash of interests and values, and, quite possibly, more physical encounters, are beamed into living rooms around the world.

Such developments both shaped and were influenced by a wave of social movements – feminist, environmental and civil rights for example – that swept much of the world in the 1960s and continued to reverberate in a variety of local forms through subsequent decades. Transformations in Soviet–American relations, moves towards the unification of Western Europe and the fragmentation of its Eastern counterpart, and shifting balances between old and new imperialisms in Africa and Asia are only a few major trends that come to mind.

Recent debates about postmodernity and the fluidity of ethnic identities and boundaries raise further questions about the relevance of modernist conceptions of 'nation' and 'state'. Outdated 'master narratives' about nation and state building, modernisation and national

identity have seemingly given way to a new relativism in which national and ethnic boundaries are viewed as discourses in flux and cultural identities are multiple imaginings in what is often viewed as post-colonial times. Heralding the end of the nation-state however, is some-what premature. Some identities are more pervasive and enduring than others, and the 'post' in post-colonial requires some thought. The nation is still the chief bulwark against the globalisation process and the state the most effective agency in managing the divisions between sexes, classes and ethnic categories. While modernist, and in some instances pre-modern, historical trajectories continue to shape the post or late modern world, particularly in societies where long-standing ethnic conflicts remain unfinished business.

Empire and colonisation

Between the late fifteenth and nineteenth centuries 'Europe spun a web about the world, and in the process the world was remade' (Cornell 1988a: 11). The British, Portuguese, Spanish, French and other European powers were the imperialist weavers of this mesh of diverse movements of peoples, capital, technology and ideas, and they all developed overseas empires of different dimensions and endurance in what they were to call Africa, the Americas, the Pacific and Asia. Such empires were merely the latest example in a world history of states seeking to control the political sovereignty of other political societies. Indeed, these European powers often had histories of being trapped within the imperial webs of earlier empire builders. Nevertheless, the sheer size of their global ambitions was unprecedented. Particularly the British pattern of geopolitical acquisition, whose post-seventeenth-century imperialist ventures were to prove a movement of unparalleled expansion.

Millions of emigrants left the shores of the various nations that formed the British state for a variety of individual and institutional reasons. Some were forced out by famine or poverty, political or religious intol-erance, by the order of a court official or the point of a sword; others left to seek a better life for themselves, and possibly their families. The lure of a job, land, the prospect of 'getting on', combined in a matrix of social and geographical mobility. For the state, or more accurately, those elites who shaped and implemented its policies, emigration became the panacea for economic, political and social ills and a means of seeking or cementing international trading and geopolitical gain. Rational strategy, whether individual or institutional, however, was always laced with serendipity, and once the web was established, traditions were created

that renewed or expanded the migratory networks of empire. These networks created decidedly fuzzy boundaries between 'us' and 'them' (Cohen 1994). The borders outlined on maps rarely matched social barriers between peoples, so the ambiguities and uncertainties of the frontiers between the English and Celtic fringes were often as hazy as the distinctions drawn between more distant British supranational identities. But much depended on the form and content of imperial linkage.

British colonisation took a variety of forms over time and space. Colonisation refers, in O'Sullivan See's terms, to 'the control of a specific territory by a non-indigenous group through either limited or massive settlement' (See 1986: 20). Colonies of limited settlement, characteristic of the imperial expansion of Western European absolutist states in the fifteenth century, were originally designed to assert military and administrative dominance over regions seen as having strategic importance and/or valuable natural resources. Metropolitan powers established economic or military bridgeheads to forestall indigenous reaction and to facilitate the extraction of primary resources for processing in their own societies, but in many parts of Africa and Asia, for example, the form of colonial control was indirect. Metropolitan administrators and soldiers maintained a colonial presence but relied on the manipulation and collaboration of local political elites to preserve their interests. Whether the focus was on geopolitical imperial advantage or economic exploitation, military outposts and/or entrepots required only a 'skeletal infrastructure' to maintain the colonial presence of a 'thin white line' (Weitzer 1990: 25).

In other colonial settings an extensive manufacturing, mining or agricultural infrastructure was introduced by more sizeable settler populations, requiring the forced or voluntary labour of the indigenes or imported workers and a full-scale administrative structure. Plantation economies are an obvious example. In these colonies, despite the continued emphasis on sojourner status, the metropolitan influence was far more intrusive. In some settings the word 'intrusion' hardly seems appropriate. The indigenes in various parts of the Caribbean, for example, were wiped out and replaced with varying degrees of brutality by the institutions of slavery and indentured labour.

In other parts of the Empire there was a more extensive pattern of settlement from Britain itself. In North America and the Pacific we have examples of mass settler colonies. Initially Europeans intent on economic gain visited these societies with little thought of settlement. The whalers, sealers, fur trappers, adventurers or explorers who visited their shores in the initial period of European/aboriginal contact often came and went,

sometimes with the tide, depending on the mixed fortunes they experienced. In each society, however, subsequent limited settlement gave way to mass colonisation.

Massive colonial settlement is a by-product of more limited forms, either because, for example, limited settlement fails to secure control over territory or the metropole seeks to solve its own labour problems by encouraging colonial emigration. The most distinctive feature of mass settler colonisation, therefore, is that most European colonists, after lengthy or somewhat shorter periods of transition, settled permanently. Original sojourners became settlers, or migrants set out with firm intentions of staying put.

Settler societies

Settler societies were born out of the colonisation of territories and peoples by, in this case, European migrant groups who had intentions to settle and to build 'self-sustaining states' (Weitzer 1990: 24) with their own newly minted nationhood. Such motives demanded, often their initial, but invariably subsequent, political domination over indigenous populations and their control of immigrant Others. As Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis remark, settler states are: 'Societies in which Europeans have settled, where their descendants have remained politically dominant over indigenous peoples, and where a heterogeneous society has developed in class, ethnic and racial terms' (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis 1995: 3). The balance of power described in this definition appears to support the phrase 'white settler colonies', but, as the authors observe, this expression disguises more than it reveals. To dwell over-narrowly on 'whites' hides the differences within this racial category, neglects important aspects of the dynamics of relations between various groups within and beyond 'the colony', and effectively banishes the study of the societies within the territory that was 'settled' into the realms of prehistory.

A full understanding of ethnic politics in settler societies demands that equal attention be devoted to heterogeneous aboriginal and settler populations and to other immigrants who arrived after the initial contact between indigenes and colonisers. It also requires recognising that aboriginal, settler and immigrant populations all have their prehistories. Pre-contact histories become intimately linked to, but are still separable from, the process of intermingling and the foundational myths that resulted within a territory that becomes a homeland displaced or created for respective indigenes and arrivals.

We cannot parcel the spatial and temporal encounters of these group-ings into a neat 'settler society' conceptual package since the dividing line between such societies and other colonial situations is indistinct. Colonial societies of settlement took on a variety of forms in different settings at different times with varying degrees of permanence. Moreover, the process of settlement has to be placed within a broader context than relations between a colonial power and settler colony. Indigenous peoples had their own relations of contact, embracing co-operation and conquest, before the arrival of Europeans. Both European colony and metropole were part of wider geopolitical global relations that consist-ently shaped their destinies.

A counsel of perfection would require me to confront a wide array of European settler situations in all their multidimensional internal and external aspects over several centuries. But this level of ambition is unattainable in a single, brief volume. Hence my decision to examine a few, similar cases throughout the text and use them to explore the internal relations between majority and minority populations within a framework that embraces the key external state relations that shaped such societies. The key sites of exploration will be those societies that have been called British 'colonies of settlement' or 'dominion societies'. In the following pages Australia, Canada and New Zealand will be used as core case studies. These societies are quintessential mass settler nation-states, not only in terms of their origins and subsequent rela-tions of ethnic dominance and subordination, but also because of the enduring influence of their ethnic foundations, mythical or otherwise, and the current design of ethnic politics that have resulted from a mix of continuities and changes.

Dominion societies reflect a commonality of experience through their creation by the global expansion of a specific (British) empire; a varied history of nation-building and state formation with a common thread of continued semi-dependency on the initial coloniser and, subsequently, other core players in the global system of states. Con-sequently, relations with Britain and the United States will be recurrent themes in the shaping of ethnic relations within our featured nation-states. The 'dominion societies', unlike many 'settlements' in, for example, Africa, South America and South Asia colonised by Britain and other European imperial powers, emerged from mass settlement and the sub-sequent *de jure* politically independent creation of settler nation-states. Their legal self-governance, however, was and still is, circumscribed by *de facto* economic and political semi-dependency within a global system of state relations.

There are problems with the term 'semi-periphery' given the heterogeneity of states with diverse economic and political histories that could and have been so categorised. And the pack gets shuffled in different ways if we are drawing economic or political cards to reflect a positional hand. Nonetheless, heuristically speaking, the term neatly captures settler and post-settler states who have been consistently controlled or influenced by powerful core states, but have histories that distance them from the political economies of 'Third World' peripheries. Australia, Canada and New Zealand, while hardly constituting 'pure' states, and reflecting important differences fluctuating over time (Boreham et al. 1989), are epitomes of intermediacy along a continuum of autonomy and control in world economic and political terms. All states wear masks of the exploiter and exploited in the double mirrors of history, but they particularly blur the imagery of our core case studies. Settler states, particularly Australia and New Zealand, experienced what Denoon (1983) calls relations of 'unforced dependence' with Britain, while, simultaneously, maintaining internal control over aboriginal populations and external sway over the peoples within their own small domains.

This long-standing semi-peripherality, I suggest, distinguishes such societies from the United States, although this country's British settler origins and subsequent aboriginal and immigrant policies, with the striking exception of extensive black slavery, are comparable to other colonies of settlement. And the fledgling, disunited 'states', clearly modelled many of their institutions on those of their parents. American foundation myths were shaped primarily by memories of an early severance of the umbilical link with the mother country and the rejection of British national liberalism based around a strong, centralised form of governance and a core of national, cultural traditions. American individualist, political liberal traditions and myths of origin about being a heterogeneous, 'country of immigration' was based on 'the supersession and transvaluation of European cultures' (Heller 1997: 53).

If Australia, Canada and New Zealand's semi-peripherality hinged on their 'special relationship' with Britain and its Empire, and its peculiar condition of privileged dependence, the United States swiftly moved to core status, cementing autonomy in economic and political terms, and acquiring its own imperial sway along the way. Ultimately, such dominance, particularly with respect to Canada, but hardly unimportant in Australia and New Zealand, saw one Northern American offspring of Britannia replacing its parent in its sphere of hegemonic influence over other siblings around the Pacific Rim. The United States, therefore,

diverged in important respects from the 'dominions' and relatively swiftly attained an exceptional position among post-settler states.

Australia, Canada and New Zealand also share much in common with South Africa and Zimbabwe, particularly if we reintroduce the suspect 'white settler colony' tag. But South Africa and Zimbabwe are closer to the limited, indirect settler control models noted above. Despite the establishment of coercive internal security systems and particularly authoritarian forms of 'caste-like' state domination (Weitzer 1990) the small settler elites in these states were unable to control armed struggles and the eventual political overthrow, in the case of Rhodesia, or major transformation towards political power sharing (in South Africa) of 'white' state control. The histories of South Africa and Zimbabwe, although clearly enwrapped in somewhat similar foundational myths and institutional forms of imperial diasporas, and figuring importantly in the ethnic politics of other 'dominion settlements', reveal very different historical trajectories of state formation and nation making. And their contemporary patterns of ethnic and racial political arrangements diverge considerably from the 'bi' and 'multi' cultural models of ethnic politics on display in the Antipodes and North America.

Even if we are distinguishing Australia, Canada and New Zealand from the United States and African settler colonies, the similarities between our core case studies should not be overdrawn. Australia, for example, began its history of British settlement as a gaol where those deemed undesirables were transported and temporarily deprived of their liberty, and whose relations with heterogeneous indigenes were frequently remote and hostile. Canada grew out of a long period, close on three centuries, of interdependence between Europeans and equally diverse 'First Nations', and the conflict between competing British and French colonisers. Only in New Zealand did one treaty signify a relatively rapid move towards an unstable rapprochement between the most culturally homogeneous sets of aboriginal and settler peoples of our three colonies. Nevertheless, our core case studies exhibit sufficient commonalities to provide a viable comparative platform from which to examine a number of important themes that this book will address. The remainder of this chapter will briefly rehearse some of them, providing an entrée for the main courses that follow.

State formation and nation-making

Nation-statehood is not easily achieved in settler and post-settler societies. There is a constant tension between three linked historical

trajectories. First, the process of colonisation resulting in aboriginal dispossession. Second, the process of settlement within which settler elites, at least in the early decades of settlement, are as attached to their societies of origin as to the societies they are in the process of transforming in their own image – and in societies like Canada there are competing colonisers which complicate the situation. Thirdly, the process of 'foreign' immigration which brings added populations with equally problematic allegiances into the society of settlement. These historical trajectories, in cumulative fashion, continue to influence the shape of contemporary ethnic politics. And when one acknowledges the class, gender and other points of division within these processes, the establishment of the 'nation' as a unified 'abstract community' (James 1996) is rendered even more difficult.

Colonising elites, seeking to resolve these tensions and to manage diverse internal and external forces, saw the early establishment of a centralised state within a unitary or federal political structure as an essential prerequisite for establishing law and order, acquiring and controlling territory and for capitalist development to be introduced and sustained (Pearson 1991: 197). Elites in Australia, Canada and New Zealand tried to move as quickly as possible to the formation of a unified territory, economy, mass education system and common legal rights: the foundations of a modern nation-statehood (Smith 1989). They also sought to gain early political autonomy from the imperial metropole, thus effecting greater control over the indigenes in their midst and the immigration process.

Settler elites were scarcely undivided among themselves, particularly in federally organised states. And the vast territorial sweep of North America and Australia posed problems of control of a different order to those encountered in New Zealand. Nevertheless, state making was relatively swiftly expedited by using a British bureaucratic template. Governmental, judicial, militarist (both internal and external policing) and educative institutions were established and the state agencies of political rule, legitimate violence and surveillance (Giddens 1985) spread their tentacles of mass influence steadily outwards from the initial bridge-heads of limited settlement.

Ideally, for settler elites, a developing sense of common nationhood should reinforce these institutional components of statehood. Where political elites are ideologically successful, the identities and ways of life gradually match the demands of the state and support its growth. The material, territorial and the symbolic order should be as one. The nation-state should form a unitary whole – one people in one polity in one