



## **Book Review: *Indigenous Sovereignty and the Being of the Occupier: Manifesto for a White Australian Philosophy of Origins***

By Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos, re-press, Melbourne, 2014.

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The significance of this publication can be appreciated with reference to two recent moments in Australian public life. The first is Australian Attorney-General George Brandis' signalling a shift in foreign policy by stating that "no Australian government of either political persuasion 'acknowledges or accepts' the use of the word *occupied* in relation to Palestine" (Australian Associated Press 2014). This semantic reorientation was endorsed by Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who described the longstanding conflict between Palestine and Israel as pertaining to 'disputed' territories, rather than as a matter of 'occupation' (Hurst 2014). The second moment was during Q&A, a live panel show screened by the national broadcaster, when a senior Indigenous leader from Utopia, Rosalie Kunoth Monks (2014), criticised not only the failures, but also the flawed premise of the federal government's 'intervention' into remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. After explaining the importance of her language and her resistance to historical and current attempts to assimilate Indigenous people to better serve the nation's cultural and economic 'development', she said very slowly and clearly to camera: "I am not the problem."

*Indigenous Sovereignty and the Being of the Occupier: Manifesto for a White Australian Philosophy of Origins* brings moments like these into a coherent philosophical framework. Like Rosalie Kunoth Monks, Toulou Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos reframe a persistent problem in a new way, opening a future when the belated recognition of Indigenous sovereignty can become part of our national narrative. Their book provides persuasive arguments and moral courage for readers who are seeking to come to terms with, and contribute to, unravelling a violent occupation of Aboriginal Australia that has persisted for well over two centuries.

*Indigenous Sovereignty and the Being of the Occupier* makes an original, theoretically sophisticated and lucid contribution to several areas of research. Drawing on the research of key Indigenous academic theorists of sovereignty and knowledge, it penetrates stubborn social, ontological and epistemological problems within critical race and whiteness studies, political theory, Australian studies, philosophy and studies of post-colonialism, as well as de-colonisation and multiculturalism. There is no hyperbole in the authors' self-conscious use of the term 'manifesto' to describe their project. Taking Marx's *Communist Manifesto* as a point of departure, they present Indigenous sovereignty as the spectre haunting white Australia and seek to unravel a 'holy alliance' of old Australian institutions determined to exorcise this spectre. As "... politicians, judges, academics and media proprietors, businesspeople and church leaders ..." (9), we form part of this alliance. The predictable effect of our governing, law-making, business-building and knowledge production is to erase the philosophical problem of origins in Australia evident in the question posed by the subject of Indigenous sovereignty: "I come from here. Where do you come from?" (13)

Another sense in which the book is a true manifesto is the authors' commitment to not simply describe the world, but to participate in changing it by producing a philosophy of

white Australia capable of addressing “our being as occupier” (14). They approach Australia as one instance of a broader Western epistemological orientation towards the value of possession with specific localised consequences:

Unable to retreat from the land we have occupied since 1788, and lacking the courage unconditionally to surrender power to the Indigenous peoples, white Australia has become ontologically disturbed. Suffering what we describe as ‘onto-pathology’, white Australia has become dependent upon ‘the perpetual-foreigners-within’, those migrants in relation to whom the so-called ‘old-Australians’ assert their imagined difference. (14)

The remainder of the book presents a careful philosophical argument to support this case and invites us to imagine conditions for encountering Indigenous sovereignty beyond the ‘onto-pathology’ which, the authors argue, both founds and continues to ground the nation.

Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos advocate a philosophical historiography to make visible the *relationship* between white occupiers and Indigenous people, which *produces* existing historiographical debates about the ‘facts of history’. While acknowledging the disciplinary achievements of historians and anthropologists that led to the overturning of *terra nullius* in *Mabo (Mabo v Queensland (No 2))*, the authors point to a failure to engage “... the very heart of white Australian being, the being of the occupier” (18). They link this failure to a pervasive ideological proposition: “... that white Australians are *essentially* settlers and only accidentally occupiers” (19). It is time, they argue, to break the philosophical silence on this matter by explicitly rejecting approaches to knowledge driven by “recruiting facts and arguing over their authenticity”. It is the philosopher’s proper role to address “... the living force of history and defiant being of the occupied that frames these facts and gives them their significance” (23). The problem is that knowledge currently produced *about* Indigenous people and race relations proceeds as though a sovereign, white, Australian nation is a fact in itself: “The belief that white Australia would not have been an essentially different place were the land not already owned when Europeans first arrived manifests a profound truth about white Australians” (25). In this sense, we *require terra nullius* to remain as the enduring core of our national being; our political and legal institutions are ingenious (and disingenuous) in sustaining this practical fiction.

The authors trace a perverse political logic through which the idea of *terra nullius*—far from having been abandoned—has expanded its scope to *include* Indigenous Australians as subjects for whom the land was originally un-occupied/unsettled. They argue that the ‘post-racial’ multicultural state of formal equality of citizenship put into place from the Whitlam era was predicated on a “conception of *terra nullius* for all” (26). Further, chillingly, they argue that the annihilation of the Indigenous sovereign being, which poses the question ‘where do you come from?’ has a dual target: “*the bearer of the question* of our true origins, as well as *the question itself*” (17).

This point resonates with a neoliberal policy context of ‘intervention’ predicated on the urgent need to address issues related to ‘Indigenous dysfunction’. Over the past decade this has seen Indigenous sovereignty struggles represented in media and academic accounts as a ‘failed project’, even as Aboriginal tent embassies erupt in cities and regional centres to contest various ‘development’ processes from coal seam gas mining and nuclear waste dumping to urban ‘renewal’.

Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos position the occupying white subject recruited to the annihilation of Indigenous sovereignty within a genealogy of the West. They trace its ontology from the Athenian *polis*’ ‘gathering-we’ (39) of the philosopher and his friends, through the Christian ‘gathering-we’ of believers, the French Revolutionary ‘gathering-we’

as solidarity to the ‘gathering-we’ of private property owners. To grasp the onto-pathology of white occupation, they focus, in particular, on a tension between the last two configurations of ‘gathering-we’, contrasting the social contract, which grounds the possessive subject of liberal-capitalist democracies with the “the subject’s erotic moment of fusion with the universal gathering of solidarity” (44). At stake are two distinctive articulations of individuality and universality. On one hand there is the pure ‘I’ of the property owner, the empty, universal individual delivered by capitalist modernity as the end of history and, on the other hand, the substantive universality through which futures of global solidarity might be imagined and enacted. The property owning form of universal subjectivity “... attaches itself arbitrarily to some territory and imposes boundaries as the rightful domain of the nation” and, in this process, denies itself the “all-encompassing solidarity of the indeterminate gathering” (45). This denial, in turn, motivates criminal activity aimed towards “... all others whose acts of solidarity serve as the perpetual ground for the repetition of this self/other directed violence” (45). The authors’ use of the term ‘criminality’ is far from a rhetorical device; it is central to their analysis and grounded in their engagement with Indigenous knowledge of white Australia.

The second part of Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos’ manifesto builds on this genealogical framework to elaborate a philosophical exercise. The authors attempt to imagine a future where the sterile reflections on historical data, which have preoccupied post-Mabo historiography, are abandoned to enable us to become instead “... immersed in the drama of our ontology” (49). This would require us to name our being as empty of sovereignty in the face of the question posed by Indigenous sovereignty, ‘where do you come from?’ This emptying of the subject of property ownership is a radical orientation of the self as currently constituted—imagined as free to impose its will on an other, constructed in Hegelian terms as ‘the thing’, a specificity regarded as being *without a will of its own* (54). It is to undo “... the primary form of embodiment for modern Western subjectivity ... invoked whenever we assert ‘this is mine’” (55). It is also to unsettle the symbiotic relationship between the individual property-owning subject and the system of economic exchange that constructs a homely world of fellow property owners.

Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos argue that the sovereignty asserted by the *instituted ‘gathering-we’* of property owners is anchored in the willingness to sacrifice one’s own life, rather than in the Lockean mixing of one’s labour with the earth. Hence, the sacrifice of life that was, and is, part of Indigenous resistance to occupation is a *fact* betraying a deep ontological tension within the nation. This tension finds expression in ontological violence against the Indigenous other and ontological terror against ourselves:

... the violence directed against the Indigenous peoples is the very ground of the occupier’s being as *Australian*, being Australian becomes *co-extensive* with the non-recognition of Indigenous people as sovereign in their own right ... This is how the logic that frames the occupier subject-world relationship renders both Australian subjectivity and Australian territory exclusively white. (66)

Hence, the overturning of *terra nullius* in Mabo (*Mabo v Queensland (No 2)*) has not shifted the following imperative of whiteness: “act as if the land were originally without owners” (67). Drawing on Indigenous scholars’ accounts of the history and politics of native title, they represent the *Native Title Act* as “... the *formal embodiment* of white Australia’s collective criminal will” (68) and situate post-Mabo desires to better “understand Aboriginal people” in this context. In the absence of a relationship between mutually recognising sovereign subjects, the collection of historical facts and anthropological data relating to Indigenous people becomes a process of ‘cannibalisation’, which Indigenous legal theorist, Irene Watson, argues aims to “Aboriginalize the majority” (69-70).

The authors' next move is to explain their central claim that "racist epistemologies are not the cause but the symptom of the white Australian onto-pathology" (71). Drawing on Aileen Moreton-Robinson's (2004) pioneering research on whiteness as an epistemological *a priori*, shaping knowledge of Indigenous people, they point out that:

... reducing the other to *the known* generates the appearance of an 'innocent' desire on the part of the occupier ... This constitutes an epistemological transformation of the being of the occupier through the elimination of Indigenous ontological sovereignty from the field of vision of the (white) knower ... This act of denial is coextensive with a *wilful* blindness to the effects of our being as white Australian, to the question of our origins and to the bearer of the question as a sovereign being. (74-75)

This blindness has profound consequences for the way in which Indigenous people are positioned within political processes and institutions within our national federation: "... the ever-present logic of criminality drives the occupier to see, not only the immigrants, but *everyone* who is not part of the self-instituting white gathering-we as coming into sovereign space *from the outside*, so to speak" (78). In this context the gathering of knowledge *about* Indigenous Australia—rather than constituting engagement *with* Indigenous knowers—is generated through a logic that seeks to *include* them within the space of a nation, imagined as *if* the land were without owners prior to its political constitution as a white possession. Even when Indigenous people are accorded rights related to ethnic identification and cultural difference, they remain "abstractly constructed as virtual whites" (80-81), as it is white authorities that determine the epistemological basis for the recognition of such rights. The criminal will to forget the question of origins perpetually seeks to displace questions of political sovereignty with a politics of cultural authenticity. Its aim is to gather Indigenous people, often together with particular groups of immigrants, as targets for assimilation within the ontological plane of white sovereignty.

The book's final movement is to identify a story routinely deployed to alleviate the anxiety of white Australia's onto-pathology. Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos identify the story of the 'perpetual foreigner within' as a source of legitimation for white Australian claims to exclusive sovereignty:

The white Australian collective generates the 'memory' of rightful ownership and sovereign being by presenting to an other as *always having been here* if and only if the other arrives on the scene *after* the white Australian collective ... It is in the presence of the foreigner that I can recall and present myself as the sovereign creator of the white Australian nation-state ... The white Australian collective is thus divided into a dominant group, the ones in need of recognition, and foreigners-within who would-be white Australian. (87)

Efforts to exorcise the criminal will of the white Australian occupier of sovereign Indigenous lands are incessant; the appearance of being 'original owners' requires the continuous production and maintenance of a distinction between the dominant group and successive waves of migrants from different parts of the world allowed into the collective of property-owning subjects. An important aspect of the symbiotic relationship between the dominant group and perpetual 'foreigners-within' is that the latter are expected to perform their national belonging as property owners through an active disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty.

The ways in which the 'foreigner-within' is racialised are complicated, but no less real as a consequence:

... the markers of racialized difference need not consist of a set of fixed essential characteristics, like 'skin colour' or 'racial affiliation', but may instead be drawn from any number of assigned group characteristics that can be relied upon to render visible the members of a designated group. (92)

These characteristics might include language, religion, and social and cultural practices, for example, which attach 'ethnic differences' to certain groups of migrants within a 'multicultural' nation-state. This means that members of communities who have been in Australia over several generations are positioned, nevertheless, as 'white-but-not-white-enough'.

For example, Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos argue that, within the story required to alleviate the anxieties attached to the criminal will of the white occupier, Southern Europeans

... are here to serve the very specific and indispensable role of supplying the recognition that ought to have been given to and received from the Indigenous peoples. Indeed this latter cannot be given and received in the absence of recognition of the Indigenous peoples' sovereignty, a form of recognition that would effectively require elimination of the dominance of white Australian institutions and culture. (94)

They consider three interlocking images of the 'foreigner-within', through which the white occupier state recruits new generations of migrants to participate in the criminal will to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their lands. The subversive foreigner is defined by the racialised difference of the group to which s/he belongs and the compliant foreigner is defined by his/her individual property-owning status. The third image, of the foreigner as submissive, is a product of multicultural policies and practices. Whereas the benefits of whiteness were bestowed conditionally on compliant foreigners, if they met expectations defined by the white British majority, the submissive foreigner, of official multiculturalism, simultaneously capitalises on performances of ethnic distinctiveness, while demonstrating loyalty to the Anglophone state.

In the current (post-) multicultural era, the detention centre has become the primary site where images of subversive, racialised differences form a counterpoint to the self-represented, ethnic differences of the submissive 'foreigner-within'. Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos make the important point that the continuous interplay between these images can lead Indigenous scholars to regard non-Indigenous Australians, of various ethnic backgrounds and racialised experiences, as "... equally complicit in perpetuating [the] white race privilege" (102), which grounds the occupier being.

The final chapter of the manifesto is a powerful challenge. Rather than being the domain of political arguments, anthropological expertise and those preoccupied with enumerating the historical facts, Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos suggest that the Indigenous-white encounter is imperative for *all* Australians. In the absence of this encounter, we remain empty of being—alienated from our genuine past and incapable of thinking and inhabiting a future unencumbered by the onto-pathology of our criminal will. This encounter involves more than reflecting on the injustices of the past and calling for redistributed wealth. Our capacity to emerge as sovereign beings paradoxically requires unconditional surrender to the being of Indigenous sovereignty. Rather than relying on the image of the perpetual 'foreigner-within' to secure our claim to belonging or appealing to "history as the graveyard of facts" (106), we must finally be answerable to the question 'where do you come from?'

This returns us to the examples with which I began this review. To take responsibility for our being as the occupier is to respond to Kunoth Monk's sovereign Indigenous statement with its ethical and philosophical corollary. It is to relocate ourselves within the problem of sovereignty that the nation is yet to face.

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