Book Review

The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the end of Liberal Consensus, **by Peter Sutton, pp. 280. Preface by Marcia Langton, published by Melbourne University Press, 2009.**

Introduction by Sandy Toussaint

The 2009 publication of *The Politics of Suffering* by anthropologist and linguist Peter Sutton generated a mix of responses. Whilst a number of these were published in newspapers and journals (e.g. Altman, 2009; Neill 2009; Dombrowski 2010) much of the debate about the book's content was expressed via the Australian Anthropology Society's (AAS) electronic network. A great many of the comments criticised Sutton's work, in part because of the misgivings he expressed about certain aspects of anthropology's engagement with Aboriginal and Islander groups, and policy developments such as the 'Northern Territory Intervention', as well as the picture he presented about contemporary Australian Aboriginal life. A key and heart-wrenching concern for Sutton, one that permeates the book, is the extent of Aboriginal suffering, especially for families with whom he has sustained a long-term relationship. Analysis of the network exchanges as a kind-of interlocutor revealed as much about the diversity and emphases of anthropology in Australia, as it did about the how, when and why some topics are privileged. In light of the debate and review content, it seemed relevant in a collection such as this to seek additional perspectives, primarily because the topic and the debate that ensued touched on many of the epistemological, ethical and political issues that are at the heart of the World Anthropologies Network: the production and vantage point of different knowledge claims, disciplinary critique and transformation, and the way in which power in all its various symbolic and material forms is used and by whom. It is the case, too, that so many of the issues Sutton raised continue to exist, especially for Aboriginal and Islander people themselves, and also, of course, for anthropologists and the discipline more broadly. With these emphases in mind, Pat Lowe and Triloki Pandey agreed to review

the book. As their biographical notes show, they come from different disciplinary backgrounds, knowledges and cultures, qualities that reveal a certain distinctiveness, as well as a few overlaps, in their reviews of Sutton's work.

Altman, J. 'What Liberal Consensus'? 2009, Indigenous Politics - A review of *The Politics of Suffering*, http://newmatilda.com (16 July 2009)

Dombrowski, K. 2010 The white hand of capitalism and the end of indigenism as we know it: A review essay, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 21, Issue, 1.

Neill, R. Untruth by omission: A review of the Politics of Suffering, 2009, *The Weekend Australian*, 11-12 July, p.17.

Review by Pat Lowe

Peter Sutton, an anthropologist who has worked around North Queensland since the early 1970s, was once a left-wing activist for Aboriginal Land Rights, sharing the prevailing view that all ills in Aboriginal society were the result of colonialism, with its displacement and maltreatment of the original inhabitants, and would be remedied by a return to country and the maintenance of culture. I am not an anthropologist, but I remember activists assuring me that most indigenous social problems in the Kimberley, where I live, including unemployment, widespread alcoholism, poor health and early death, the high suicide rate and interpersonal violence, would be solved or greatly ameliorated when people were able to move back onto their own country. Instead, these indicators have got much worse, and this is the problem that Sutton seeks to explain in *The Politics of Suffering*.

To illustrate the deteriorating state of affairs on some communities, Sutton documents the violent ends of many of the people he knew, backed up by grim, upwards-trending statistics of indigenous suicides and murders.

A main thread in Sutton's argument is that certain aspects of traditional society were and are incompatible with the demands of settled life, and that these incompatibilities have never been taken into account by politicians, decision makers and the do-gooders who have supported and funded the Land Rights and

'return to country' movements. He points to traditional means of social control, including fear of sorcery and violent retribution, the absence of political and legal structures, beliefs about ill-health and untimely death and the absence of a germ theory of disease.

Sutton argues that, to maintain groups of people in discrete communities, which he calls 'ghettos', is to deny them the benefits of modernity and to keep them tied to an idealised past that neither can nor should be revived. He overlooks the modernising influence of community schools, television and the Internet as well as the mobility of the residents, and doesn't seem to have noticed that the younger generation on most communities show every sign of being part of the global youth culture. He claims that, while most post-contact groups fared reasonably well under the relatively benign control of superintendents, missionaries and pastoralists, they cannot provide the leadership necessary to managing the communities themselves. While I had attributed failures in community leadership to the denial of indigenous autonomy over so many decades, Sutton puts it down to pre-contact social organization and kinship obligations.

The persistence of what Sutton considers the most maladaptive practices and customs he explains by child rearing, and gives instances of adults' failure to correct or punish tantrums and violent behaviour in children, and active condonement of it through the practice of 'cruelling': teasing or hurting a small child to provoke rage and retaliation. Similarly, he claims that habits of cleanliness and hygiene are seldom taught or modelled.

There is a certain relief in truth-telling, and many of Sutton's observations are correct; conditions on many Aboriginal communities are shocking, and lifestyle certainly plays its part in the low life expectancy of dwellings, cars, personal belongings and people themselves. Alcohol abuse remains a major contributor to high rates of poor health, accident, suicide, violence and murder. Sutton's solution, in line with a new wave of right-wing thought, is to close the ghettos and 'modernise'. He approves of the Northern Territory intervention driven by the Howard government and continued by Rudd's. In support of his argument for modernising, he points out, somewhat irrelevantly in the context of remote communities, that Aboriginal Australia is changing through high rates of intermarriage with white Australians, implying that soon you won't be able to tell us apart: AO Neville's dream come true. This, he implies, will be a good thing. So much for the people he has befriended during his working life.

It's the Trugunini argument again: yes, there will always be genetic descendants of Aboriginal people—and all that made their ancestors who they were will have been obliterated. Modernisation can be a euphemism for cultural genocide, and some of us still consider this to be a tragedy..

Meanwhile, absent from all sides of this argument is the indigenous voice. What do Aboriginal people think? Those who live on remote communities have not been forced to live there: they have chosen to, often finding refuge there from the excesses of the towns. Before we take another stab at social engineering, let's hear from them.

Review by Triloki Pandey

The Politics of Suffering is a very important book. Its importance lies in its clear and thoughtful assessment of the impact of liberal thinking and state policies on the rural and urban Australian Aborigines. Sutton's text reveals that he is a superb fieldworker; his linguistic and ethnographic studies of various Aboriginal communities are well known. Coupled with firsthand fieldwork observations that began in 1969, in conjunction with a careful reading of the available literature on Australian Aboriginal life, he documents the tragic failures of social engineering schemes promoted by the Australian state, as well as by liberal thinking and acting politicians. Marshalling comparable evidence about indigenous groups from the Native North America and many other countries, Sutton paints a moving picture of their sad situation.

Given my own forty-year familiarity with the 'tribal' situation in India, and with various Native American groups, I share resonance with many of Sutton's portrayals of Aboriginal life. I agree with him, for instance, that the modernization agenda of the state has not worked for the non-state indigenous groups almost everywhere. Sutton opines that, 'The uses of diversity and multiculturalism are considered to be of important value' (p.61), especially by the modern state. But for racially, culturally, and ethnically constructed minority communities, it is not only a question of their 'rights' but their very survival. Globalization of values such as 'humane treatment and equality for all' (p.17) has not changed much. Furthermore, despite criminalizing racial and other types of ' domination' and 'discrimination' by the state (p. 116), such practices are still widely reported. It is the racism of the 'pale–skinned people' (pages 17 and 160) that has hindered

the development of the mutual acceptance and respect that had been the primary goals of 'Reconciliation' in Australia (p.211).

Sutton constructively refers to the renowned Australian anthropologist, William Stanner, when he deliberates on Stanner's view that 'ours [non-Aborigines] is a market- civilization [whereas] theirs [Aboriginal peoples] is not' (quoted at p.67). Indeed, there is a sense in which 'The Dreaming' and 'The Market' are mutually exclusive. Given this difference in worldview and value system, it is hardly surprising to learn that the projects to create one nation and one people, rather than perpetuate ' two nations', 'two people' (Chapter 8) have failed. The profound dualisms such as ' Black fella'/ White fella' in Australia and 'Black/White' in the United States have also persisted resulting in violence of various kinds (p. 213).

I agree with Sutton that one should not blame colonialism for every kind of asymmetry and injustice and discrimination in society. At the same time, I have no doubt that the culture of colonialism has promoted ' economic exploitation', ' inferiorization', (p. 204), and dehumanization of the colonized by the colonizer. Colonialism has not fostered a feeling of 'relatedness' or 'oneness' of the nation's people (p. 98), but it has caused divisiveness and intolerance in far too many ways. Sutton is absolutely right when he observes that that industrialization failed to produce homogeneity and cultural uniformity in Australia, as everywhere else, and cultural differences continue to survive and have meaning. The challenges that remain are how to deal with such differences in all multicultural and pluralistic societies, including in Australia.

I have regularly been struck by the Australian experience documented in anthropological studies of various Aboriginal communities over time, What was most striking to me was the convergence between my own views and experiences when working with indigenous groups in non-Australian settings, although some differences are also evident. A difference between the Aboriginal Australian and Native American situation, for instance, is how the land claims cases are handled in court. According to Sutton, the evidence of indigenous witnesses is preferred over the testimony of anthropologists, whereas this is not the case in American courts convened to hear such cases where anthropological evidence is given more weight.

The Politics of Suffering should be required reading for anyone wishing to understand the local and varied circumstances of indi-

genous peoples throughout the world. In my view, laws, policies and political adjustments alone cannot influence reconciliation between Aboriginal and settler populations. It must be sought deeper down, in the hearts and minds of the people. Intellectual sympathy can draw people together; compassion and sympathy can unite them.