Australia Day and the Problem of Historical Justice: Creating an Inclusive Political Culture from Diverse Memories

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Abstract

Australia has, like other democratic countries, not just one but several enduring pasts which call for historical justice. In this paper, I argue that memories of controversial events cannot be viewed in isolation but need to be understood in their historical constellation with other political memories in order to achieve an inclusive historical justice. In Australia, memories of the plight of Aborigines, of the British Empire's rule over settlers and of racist immigration policies respectively, justify political claims of recognition while forgetting and excluding other's experiences. Drawing on Australia Day as a commemorative lynch pin, I show how these historical claims relate and that, over time, not only the dominance of certain memories varied but how the past was remembered. The different forms of memory and forgetting need to be understood and employed to achieve historical justice. I suggest that partial memories of groups can be recognized within an overall social cohesion of civil society, driven by memories of mutual recognition. Crucially, society needs to locate and then overcome its enduring historical struggle that connects and divides its conflicting groups to create an inclusive and historically just political culture.

Earlier this year, Mick Dodson, a leading Aboriginal Rights activist, received the award for Australian of the Year. The accolade, presented each year on Australia Day, commemorates the landing of the first European settlers in 1788. For indigenous Australians however, Australia Day is remembered as 'Invasion Day'. Sizing on the irony of this circumstance, Dodson called for a public debate about changing the date of Australia Day from the 26th of January to one that would include all Australians. However, the debate was curtailed when Prime Minister Kevin Rudd flatly rejected the possibility of any alteration, lest a discussion. Rightly so, one might argue, as an all inclusive commemoration would prove to cover up many historical rifts that continue to persist in Australian society. Though, the outright rejection of any discussion at all was more likely motivated by the fear of revealing precisely those rifts. After all, Australia Day conjures up many of the social divisions that Australian history brought about: from imperial stratification over crimes against minorities to racial ambivalence about immigration. The more pressing question then might be, what would it take to create a historically inclusive remembrance? The relevance of this challenge, of course, is not limited to the antipodean continent. In fact, Australia's struggle with its diverse memories offers a telling example of the complexities of historical injustice that are illuminating for other countries as well.

In 1988, 21-years before Dodson received the award, Aborigines had been left on the periphery of the official 200-year celebration for the First Fleet's arrival, where they protested against the ceremony, calling for Native Land rights. It had been merely another 21 years earlier that they had gained full citizen rights and equality in the constitution. Still, the historical injustice that was beared upon them through colonial settlements persisted. A few years after the Bicentennial, Aboriginals were granted a principle title to traditional lands by the High Court, later an official report detailed and condemned the practice of abducting so-called 'half-cast' children from Aboriginal parents, which had lasted for 100 years until approximately 1969, and 2008 the federal government finally apologised for this practice. And still, the historical injustice persists, not because the past can not be changed but because its consequences are all too obvious in the current lives of the indigenous population of Australia.

Yet, reflecting on Australia's Aboriginal past and its persistence in the present, as if this was not intricate enough, is only part of the country's historical problems. The official Celebration of 200 years of colonial settlement conjured up another dark chapter of Australia's past, by way of trying to obscure it. Copying from the American 1976 celebrations in New York, boats from all over the world sailed into Sydney's harbour on Australia Day 1988 (Splilman 1994). The multicultural image of this event was greeted enthusiastically by 2 million spectators, even though it was historically askew. Until 1973, the official immigration policy was to keep Australia 'White' and preferably British, thus for 185 years boats came principally from England and Europe. And while immigration has always been central to Australian society, especially since World War II, Australia Day was actually created as an anti-immigration manifestation.

Since the 'Rum Rebellion' in 1808, in which Australian proprietors ousted the colonial governor-general on the anniversary of the First Fleet's landing, the commemoration was a symbol to the Australian-borns of their claim to self-rule against British administrators (Kwan 2005). Australian nationalism was effectively born. Becoming a mass movement in the goldfields of the 1850s nationalism was nurtured by the 'Australia Natives Association', which fought for the rights of those born in Australia, resisted non-'White' immigration and propagated the celebration of Australia Day, then called Foundation Day. Early on, the colonial government recognised the divisive danger of this commemoration, which was in opposition to universal values that the empire extended tosubjects under its rule, and incorporated the celebration officially in 1818 in order to control it. Ever since, a national and a governing version of Australian settlement history existed side by side. These memories were two sides of one coin, with very different visions of immigration and what constitutes Australian society.

Against Westminster's wishes, an exclusionary immigration model, enacted shortly after the federation of Australian colonies in 1901 and known colloquially as the White Australia Policy, became the dominant ideology. Formally, the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, however, did not exclude in letter immigrants on the basis of race– this was left to the discretion of customs officers and their sense of Australian national belonging. Thus, the policy instituted the distinction between universal imperial authority and an exclusionary nationalism, a distinction which became characteristic of Australian political culture (Encel 1970). In effect, the historical

'Australian legend' of settlement and of oppressive British rule (Ward 1958) remained a compelling memory and nationalistic ideology until the 1970s, a justification of White Australian national selfrule. The end of the White Australia Policy in 1973 made way for a policy of diverse immigration and for a concurrent interpretation of a multicultural past that was put on display on Australia Day 1988. Conservatives who clung to Australian nationalism despised the new multicultural society and its disparate memories, pasts and heritages. Instead, many tried to highlight the centennial of federation in 2001 as a national commemoration of overarching Australian achievements (Birrell 2001), with paltry popular success.

Beginning in the early 1980s, migration museums actively promoted multicultural memories in Australia (McShane 2001). In the years since, they have struggled with the challenge of creating an Australian past that incorporated the new found 'ethnic' mix of heritages. While a multitude of community memories assembled around a core history of Australian settlement seemed appropriate in the early stages, this interpretation soon faced limitations: it underestimated the social conflicts within migrant communities, the role of Aborigines which vacillated between being presented as either 'ethnic' communities or the victims of immigration was unresolved, and lastly, the disjuncture between immigrant heritage and Australian national heritage let to massive political conflicts. Multicultural approaches to commemorating the diversity of immigration found their highpoint around the celebrations of 1988 but came into crisis in the 1990s. From the late 1990s, Welcome Walls, memorials listing the names of immigrants who had arrived in Australia, were established in major cities. These installations, usually erected in the forum of a museum, exemplified an Australian community of immigrant individuals or families, indistinct of ethnicity. Such memories connected early settlers under British rule with more recent immigrants. Yet, those whose ancestors never immigrated, the ancestors of Aboriginal Australians, remained excluded.

Australian history is marked by an interwoven pattern of victimisation and exclusion, and by multiple claims for historical justice. Diverse memories compete over the past to remember sufferings as defining experiences for Australian society today. Each of the mutually exclusive memories presents a history of Australia in its own right: Aboriginals claim land rights against 'invaders', of both British colonialists and recent immigrants; Australian nationalists defend memories of the settlers' resilience in harsh bushlands as well as under the empire, against indigenous claims and non-British or non-White traditions; immigrants' memories of racist policies defy settler traditions and the import of heritages from their former home cultures mitigates their own land grab. In principle, each group has a valid claim over the past and for the present. However, each memory forgets experiences central to other memories, making its call for historical justice inevitably a partial and ignorant claim.

While these struggles with and over the past are specific to Australia, they speak to typical examples of complex historical claims and competing memories in countries all over the world (Berg und Schaefer 2008). America is similarly faced with looming pasts and historical claims, stemming from the treatment of its own indigenous population and voiced by African-American

descendents from slavery. In addition it contrasts a long and proud history of immigration with the current attempt of closing off the Mexican border. South Africa continues to battle the past in the legacy of the Apartheid regime, the history of its colonial origins and the violence of organised crime, the genesis of which can be located in the struggle against the regime. Germany, a most prominent example, continues to work through its National Socialist Past, it grapples with the European and domestic implications of German expellees' memories, and attempts to come to terms with accepting and incorporating its immigrant history. Striving for historical justice, every country has to wrestle with not one but numerous pasts, not with a national but with contradicting memories. It must accommodate for diverse stories of victimhood relating to a range of occurrences as well as to diverging experiences of the same events. Moreover, memories cancel each other out, in effort to forget what is imperative to others. Thus, remembering is politically contested by various discerning versions of history with consequential implications for social inclusion. Which past and whose version thereof dominates the political debate changes over time.

Memories have a historical time-core. The Australian settler legend directed against British rule dominated Australian popular sentiments in the 1950s and 1960s. Aboriginal history emerged in the 1970s against settler colonialism, provoking and finally winning the so-called History Wars of the 1980s and 1990s (Macintyre und Clark 2004). Simultaneous historiography of immigration developed largely unnoticed by many and gained increasing interest since 2001. Each phase remembers as much as it needs to forget the memories of other epochs. Forgetting thereby differs as much as remembering. Settler memories have been widely criticised for ignoring Aboriginal and non-White experiences. Conversely, multicultural memories of the 1980s superseded settler memories. However, the recognition of various parallel memories was not simply a substitute for a previous national history. Rather than forgetting memories of certain groups, it produced diversity by forgetting historical conflicts and relations between groups: settlers remembered next to non-White immigrant groups next to Aboriginal communities. Every experience was accepted and remembered in the private realm of its constituency, freed from political conflict.

Multicultural memories ran into problems of their own within the public realm as memories were politically contested from within remembering groups and in their diversity all together. Concomitantly, museums responded by moulding the diversity of memories into one indistinct memory of Australian immigration, which blatantly excluded the memories of the preceding phase, forgetting yet again about Aboriginal history. Recently, however, a new approach to Australian migration history has emerged. Seemingly, the latest refurbished gallery at the National Museum of Australia appears to have found a solution to the problem of inclusion. Its permanent exhibition 'Australian Journeys', which opened January this year, tells not only of immigration but of all manners of travel and migration connected to Australia, from early voyages of indigenous Pacific Islanders and European explorations in the 18th to 19th century to the international world of cricket and Australian surfers in Bali. Here, being Australian is not dependent on heritage but on the retrospective projection of today's opportunities to immigrate and to move freely, afforded by Australian citizenship. Diverse memories are bound by the

tradition of Australian authority. Social cohesion is not defined by memories but delineates their provision.

Similarly, the current discussion about Aboriginal status in Australian society is less concerned with memories of indigenous suffering in the past and more so with their social anguish in the present. On average, to reduce their destitution to just one figure, Aboriginal Australians still die 10 years younger than non-Aboriginal Australians. Interventions in Aboriginal communities by the conservative government in 2007, partly in rejection of their distinct historical land and cultural rights, have by now become largely accepted as one way of remedying the afflictions of the past (Altman und Hinkson 2007). Under the rubric of social justice they are treated as Australian citizens of the present, yet based on the memories of their mistreatment in Australian history. Historical justice, righting the wrongs of the past, engenders social equality while recognizing memories in order to protect legitimate cultural differences.

Most models of historical justice emphasise either the necessity to remember injustices and victimhood or the need to forget in order to re-unite conflicting groups (Devine-Wright 2002). These concepts usually overlook the different functions that remembering has, which can allow for both partiality and universality within one political body. On the one hand, the social frameworks by which memories are reconstructed guarantee simultaneously the preservation of a social group (Halbwachs 2006 (1925)). Thus, these partial memories may prolong conflicts between groups and should be forgotten to break the cycle. That said, it is important to acknowledge that they are legitimate in their own right, especially in the case of traumatic memories of victimhood. On the other hand, memories are evoked by political conflicts of the present to which they offer solutions (Brändström, et al. 2004). Thus, remembering alone, and not forgetting can move society beyond historical injustices. These two distinct forms of memory, of groups and of conflicts, need to be rightly located within the private and public spheres of the political body. The first form of memory is a homogenous version of the past that defines a social group and justifies its experiences. It is important within a private realm of families and communities, for them to be able to come to terms with historical trauma and loss. In the public sphere, however, such memories act divisively and may lead to a repetition of conflicts. Here, memories must draw on historical experiences of overcoming conflicts. They can act as examples of engagement and create civil unity. The past from which to go forward has to be an inclusive one, a past that is important to everyone and not just to one group. In such an environment, partial memories can exist peacefully side by side. Historical justice then combines private diversity of heritage and memories with public diversity of ideas and interests that draw from the past for a common future

Every society is challenged to find its ‘social faultline’, the historical struggle that transcends partial and conflicting memories. In Germany, for example, the ‘blood and soil’ ideology of *ius sanguinis* lies at the heart of many of its historical struggles as a continuing divide. In Australia, it is the previous colonial dependence on Britain and its resulting strict division between national belonging and state authority around which memories continue to revolve, especially as this historical characteristic is preserved in the allegiance to the Queen. Such lasting pasts can not be

overcome by memories alone but the correct application of memories may help to change the present in order to achieve political justice. Then, memories will follow and an inclusive and historically just Australia Day might actually become a real possibility.

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