Indigenous Australians and Racial Ideology: A Historical Perspective from Audrey Smedley and Brian Smedley

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ABSTRACT

The research paper mainly focuses on the description of racial ideology in Australia towards Indigenous peoples from a historical perspective. Additionally, the paper compares Australian racial ideology with the American one, which is based on the key arguments by Audrey Smedley and Brian Smedley. My findings are that both countries constructed subhuman status for the respective racial minorities, but the racialized constructions were based on different rationales. There were also rigid group boundaries between different racial groups in both countries. Furthermore, it is argued that American racial ideology was characterized by fixed, bipolar racial segregation, while Australian one highlighted the need for biological absorption into the White race and cultural and social assimilation into the White society.

Keywords: racial ideology, Indigenous Australians, segregation, the Black identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

American anthropologists Audrey Smedley and Brian D. Smedley claim that racial ideology is a distinctive American phenomenon that arose in the history of the slave trade, slave plantation economy, and perpetual slavery of African Americans [1-3]. However, even though their book on racial ideology is largely US-focused, racism and racial ideologies exist in many societies in different forms. Racial ideology arose in Australia in a similar context, compared to the American one. The population of both countries is English-speaking, and their nation-building processes were largely based on settler colonialism. Since the encounter of the First Fleet in 1788, Indigenous Australians, which are composed of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, have been historically subject to systemic discrimination, frontier conflicts, massacres, and cultural genocide, resulting in their dispossession of the land, socio-economic inequalities, and alienation from the mainstream society [4]. Indigenous nations in Australia were considered "uncivilized" by British settlers, and their traditional land was declared *terra nullius* (deserted, uninhabited land) to justify violent colonialism and oppression [5]. Indigenous Australians were heavily under-represented and disfranchised groups and with few rights. Until today, the legacy of discrimination and dispossession still plays a significant role in the social inequality that First Nations peoples suffered from.

Compared to the American context, the Australian context is also distinct to an extent [6]. The most obvious difference would be that Black people in the US were taken from the African continent by force and were forced to become slave laborers, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples viewed themselves as the traditional owners of the land and the arrival of British colonists was seen as an invasion [7]. The differences and similarities in the history of the two countries led to comparable racial ideologies with distinct features, and this can help us enrich our understanding of patterns of racial ideology from a historical perspective.

The prevalence of research on the racial ideology that focuses on dichotomous black-and-white relations in the American context indicates the need to expand the theories of racial ideology with more diverse, context-sensitive studies. The Australian case shares some similarities with the US one, and I argue that studying it would make a valuable contribution to the understanding of racial ideology in the world. In the research paper, I strive for providing a succinct description of racial ideology towards Indigenous peoples in Australia from a historical perspective, as well as a brief comparison with

the American case study based on the arguments from the book *Race in North America: origin and evolution of a worldview* by Audrey Smedley and Brian D. Smedley. Considering the significance of the history-oriented work by them in analyzing American racial ideology, it is worthwhile to first provide a summary of the book and outline key points of racial ideology in America. Using the work by their book as the guiding principles, the following part deconstructs Australian racial ideology into three parts, namely the construction of the savage status, rigid racial boundaries, and the assimilation efforts. To finish this study, an analysis on how similar or unique is anti-Indigenous racial ideology in Australia compared to the racial ideology in America is made in the final chapter.

2. RACIAL IDEOLOGY IN THE UNITED STATES

Smedley and Brian D. Smedley note that racial ideology towards Blacks did not occur until the introduction of perpetual slavery in North America [1]. Before the introduction of the slavery laws and racial ideology, there was less social stigmatization between Whites and Blacks, although Africans were forcibly taken as slaves, were transferred to North America from Africa, and became part of the slave plantation economy. They find that cooperation between Black and White servants to resist harsh masters and intermarriage between Blacks and Whites were not uncommon. Similarly, there was also less natural antipathy towards Black people from the White population. However, the authors note that the status of being slaves of Africans in the US gradually ended up with perpetual enslavement as a social institution, which marked the beginning of systematic racial ideology in American society.

2.1. Racial characteristics

According to Smedley and Brian D. Smedley, racial characteristics of Black Americans are innate, naturalized, and unalterable [1]. The colonial elite invented the racial ideology theories to explain and justify slavery, which directly contradicted the liberal spirits of American political and social institutions. Supporters of permanent slavery emphasized the property rights of slave owners rather than the human rights of Black slaves. Smedley and Brian D. Smedley believe that to reinforce their pro-slavery stance in a liberal society, racial ideologists invoked the legal history and traditions about property rights and their connections to individual liberty. The existence of the natural rights of slaves was never fully acknowledged, as proponents of racial ideology argued that the property rights of slave owners should take priority. As a consequence of the property status of slaves, Smedley and Brian D. Smedley indicate that slaves were not permitted to change their social status and this remained persistent in the 18th and

19th centuries, despite the declining economic efficiency of slavery. Therefore, I consider that the permanent status of slavery has become an entrenched part of racial characteristics of Black Americans, which were viewed as inherent, natural, and unchangeable.

2.2. Hierarchical dichotomy

In terms of racial hierarchy, there is also a rigid hierarchical dichotomy between the Black and White, in which Blacks were met with the subhuman status, as racial ideology kept developing in the US. The book by Smedley and Brian D. Smedley indicates that a hierarchical dichotomy has been drawn between the Black and White, which included their inherent cultural behavioral differences [1]. The perceived differences were further exacerbated by the cruel conditions that slaves had to suffer from. The Black race was treated as the symbol of savagery and heathenism and had connotations of negative characteristics according to the English worldview. Consequently, Smedley and Brian D. Smedley point out that the cruelty of permanent slavery was denied on the grounds that African Americans were better off to be slaves in Christian colonies than being left behind in less "civilized" Africa. The "Negro" became a separate and discrete social category that basically denied their social recognition, and its distinctiveness was asserted by legal institutions. Moreover, the limitations on equal rights and citizenship did not only apply to "pure" Blacks but also offspring of "mixed" parentage who were still considered as Black. According to the authors of the book, the unequal social hierarchy persisted even after the emancipation of Black slaves, and discrimination and oppression against Black Americans from the past also led to many social-economic issues they are still facing today.

3. RACIAL IDEOLOGY IN AUSTRALIA

Overall, they provide us valuable guidance on analyzing Australian racial ideology, as both cases might exhibit similar trajectories due to similarities in respective history. Namely, what forms of racial characteristics arise, how rigid were racialized boundaries that highlighted such characteristics, and what rationales were used to construct racial ideology?

Similar to the American case, the initial encounter between British colonists and First Nations peoples was not filled with hostilities, until the invention of racial ideology. According to Jalata, there were friendly relations and cooperation between Indigenous peoples and British colonists [5]. He notices that newcomers were initially met with curiosity from native peoples. Namely, food and supply exchange between colonists and Indigenous peoples were common, and Indigenous people sometimes helped colonists guide through the wild landscape that was unfamiliar to them. Jalata

indicates that violent confrontation and resistance only occurred after Indigenous peoples realized that British colonists, who were emboldened by the claim of *terra nullius*, wanted to expropriate the native land and obliterate their ways of life and culture.

3.1. Construction of the savage status

Racial ideology towards Indigenous peoples in Australia was first characterized by the construction of the savage status by the colonial authorities. Australia was declared *terra nullius* by British colonists after the landing of the First Fleet in 1787, according to Buchan and Heath [8]. Buchan and Heath indicate that the newly discovered land was considered wasted and not being occupied by anyone from the views of colonists, while Indigenous peoples who lived on this continent for centuries were merely "roaming over it". Buchan and Heath believe that the rationale behind *terra nullius* was that the Indigenous population did not possess the ability to practice cultivation by the European-style agriculture standards, hence the land could not be considered as inhabited. Therefore, there was no need to conquer or cede the land if the people did not possess the "polity" to be conquered [8]. The status of *terra nullius* was further exemplified by the fact that Australia was the only British colony that was obtained without a lease, fee, or contract in the research paper by Buchan and Heath. In short, the creation of the term *terra nullius* became the pretext for making the first move to introduce the concept of savageness against Indigenous peoples and marks the beginning of constructing racial ideology in Australia.

Consequently, Indigenous peoples were considered as "savage" by the Euro-centric standards, as the Indigenous society was viewed as "insufficiently developed and therefore inferior" rather than merely "different or incommensurable" from the point of view of colonists [8]. Therefore, according to Buchan and Heath, the Indigenous society compared to the European society was considered "savage" rather than "less civilized". It was noted by them that from the views of "enlightened" Europeans, families and kinship were maintained by the violent patriarch in the state of nature, while social organizations of Indigenous peoples were described as being controlled by elder men living in tribes and viewed as an illegitimate, brute, and the representation of patriarchy. This, as noted by Buchan and Heath, stands in total contrast to "civilized" social forms possessed by Europeans that were symbolized by a voluntary union of social contracts. Furthermore, because of the lack of perceived social organizations of Indigenous Australians, they were understood as having no capacity to own private properties and use land, according to Buchan and Heath. Jalata indicates that the failure of the British colonial power to recognize Indigenous customary laws and traditions, which were the ubiquitous parts of their lives of generations, had

further implications for the Indigenous population [5]. His research indicates that Indigenous peoples were dehumanized, and this status further became the pretext for mass killings committed by colonial police, and sometimes by colonial military forces. Often, massacres were carried out with impunity and sometimes were directed and organized by the colonial government to systematically eliminate the Indigenous population, according to Jalata. As a result, the Indigenous population plummeted across different states in Australia after the British colonization. For example, the Aboriginal population in Victoria decreased from an estimated 5,000-10,000 in 1884 to 806 in 1886, and the Aboriginal population in Tasmania decreased from 4,000 to 2,000 by 1818 [5]. In short, constructed "savageness" legitimized the brutal colonial invasion, including dispossession of land, obliteration of traditional ways of life, and lack of legal protection.

3.2. Racial boundaries

Buchan and Heath point out that British colonists glorified the colonial invasion as a civilizing influence to "savage" Indigenous peoples and viewed the Australian colonies as "bears of civil and religious liberty, civilization and Christianity" to the native [8]. Such contrast, in a way, further reinforces the rigidity of racial boundaries. The article by Buchan and Heath highlights the colonists' appeal to rescue "savages" from the state of nature, and the realization that such "civilization of the natives" required Indigenous Australians to abandon their traditional social organizations and embrace European ways of productivity through missionaries and teachings [8]. Ironically, the "humanitarian" concerns to "uplift" Indigenous peoples as the civilizing missions were merely a facade of brutal, jingoistic, expansionist policies of settler colonialism. Buchan and Heath point out that the supposed superior European standards of land use not only forced Indigenous peoples to abandon customary ways of life but also did not prevent the dispossession of the land of Indigenous peoples, which would have been necessary for adopting European-style agriculture for them [8]. The British laws were not effectively applied to Indigenous Australians due to the perceived lack of "possession of any Code of Laws intelligible to a Civilized People" of Indigenous people [8].

Furthermore, the paternalistic nature of policies that are designed to target Indigenous groups in contemporary Australia is still reminiscent of the historical patterns, which emphasize so-called "civilizing missions" to bridge the gap between "civilized" White Europeans and "savage" Indigenous. According to Atkinson, Taylor, and Walter, certain policies that targeted Indigenous communities reflect paternalistic, racist impressions that a "chaotic and primitive" Indigenous society could be righted [9]. One of the significant recent examples is the

creation of the 2007 Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act (NTER). The NTER was a series of measures mainly to restrict consumption of alcohol and pornography in the Northern Territory (around 30 percent of the population is Aboriginal), and the Act was triggered by widespread media coverage on child abuse within Aboriginal communities. Atkinson, Taylor, and Walter believe that such disproportionate, draconian, ill-equipped responses to address complex roots of Indigenous disadvantages further contribute to systemic othering of Indigenous groups [9]. Their work also demonstrates entrenched racist stereotypes of Indigenous peoples in the Australian society, which still suggests that they should renounce violence and aggression and embrace the "mainstream" society. I argue that the myths that highlight the contrast between "civilized" Whites and "savage" First Nation peoples from both past and present prove the rigid nature of racial boundaries.

3.3. Assimilation efforts and obliteration of identities

The brutalities against the Indigenous population in Australia were accompanied by the desire for and the rise of White Australian nationalism. According to Moran, the popular call for creating an ethnically homogeneous Australian nation naturally drew attention to ethnic differences and assimilation of the increasing arrivals of immigrant workers from Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century [10]. He believes that the concept of White Australia emerged mostly as a reaction to the fear of the "Asian invasion" and was characterized by the notions of Britishness, Anglo-Saxondom, and settler colonialism. In his research, White nationhood served as a unifying ideology that transcended several distinct, conflicting interests in the Australian society: the middle class and the working class, pro-free trade and protectionists, Catholics and Protestants, and different national groups. Moran further indicates that the White Australian ideology asserted the need to maintain racial unity by highlighting racial purity, which was reflected in the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act that halted immigrant arrivals from non-European countries. As for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, "White Australia" meant the justification for continuing dispossession of the land and assimilation policies for them to allow the White race to develop civilization continuously [10].

The initial assimilation efforts were introduced through biological absorption to "uplift" the Indigenous race. Moran's paper indicates that many White settlers noticed the "Aboriginal problem" in many Australian cities and towns in the 1920s and 1930s, as the presence of Aboriginal peoples was seen as a threat to the White nation [10]. It is worth noticing that the "Aboriginal problem" did not concern Aboriginal peoples living in

remote areas who continued to practice hunting and gathering in traditional ways without much contact with Whites. Its primary concerns, according to Moran, were Aboriginal peoples with non-Aboriginal ancestry, who were described by derogatory terms like "half-caste", "quadroon", and "octoroon", as those "mixed" Aboriginal peoples who often lived in rural parts of Australia could not be easily ignored. Moran further highlights the salience of the fear of moral and biological dangers in growing race-mixing, which transgressed fundamental racial boundaries between Whites and Blacks. The "Aboriginal problem" gained attention from federal politicians and was further evidenced by the 1937 Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities, which acknowledged "the problem of the growing colored population" as a national issue and must be dealt with [10]. The 1937 Conference proposed the biological absorption of the Aboriginal race into the White race by asserting that "the destiny of the natives of Aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth" [10].

Additionally, according to Moran, the policy-makers in the 1937 Conference hoped that the effects on "mixed-bloods" would eventually extend to "full-bloods" after dealing with "mixed-bloods" [10]. The 1937 Conference was followed by some implicit administrative rules across different Australian states [10]. He highlights that those highly racialized views on "uplifting efforts" were rather acceptable for the mainstream and not considered as racist back then, while the "uplifting efforts" were championed by various humanitarian, "friends of the Aborigines", and Christian and women's organizations. The first step of assimilation policies on Indigenous peoples was to propagate imaged dangers of Aboriginal race in race mixing for the White population, while gradually eliminating the Aboriginal race by biological absorption.

After World War II, assimilation efforts in the Aboriginal issue shifted from biological absorption to social and cultural assimilation. Moran points out that after World War II and the defeat of Nazism, overt biological racism and eugenics sustained heavy criticism and were no longer considered as a suitable part of official policies [10]. Under the reshaped climate of anti-colonialism and anti-racism, efforts to assimilate Indigenous peoples into the White society had to avoid any explicit reference to race, according to Moran. Nevertheless, he highlights that newer assimilation policies were driven by the demands of eradicating Indigenous identities, although they were partially infused with humanitarian impulses and good intentions with the desire to help improve living conditions of Indigenous people, such as housing, unemployment, discrimination, poverty, crime, and health. Namely, new policies often contained progressively break-ups of Aboriginal stations and reserves by offering better

education, training, and employment, housing services for Aboriginal peoples who lived in predominantly White communities. Moran indicates that certain forms of assimilation policies on cultural and social assimilation of Indigenous peoples were more subtle, like granting Aboriginal peoples exemptions from protection and welfare acts if they could prove that they already abandoned Aboriginal traditions and could adopt "modern" lifestyles, while certain forms of them were more coercive and traumatic, such as taking Aboriginal children away from their original families and being adopted by White families. There was a significant change in terms of the symbol of assimilation policies, but the substance remained relatively consistent, which still aimed to obliterate Indigenous identities, cultural practices, and customary laws in Australia, despite the shifted focus uncial and cultural aspects of newer policies.

4. CONCLUSION

Many forms of resistance were organized by Indigenous rights activists, ranging from anti-racial discrimination campaigns, land rights movements, and constitutional recognition, and legal barriers against Indigenous people are mostly gone today. However, despite the apparent progress, compared to non-Indigenous Australians, Indigenous Australians today suffer much more from various socio-economic issues, including high unemployment, low earnings, housing issues, health issues, high incarceration rate, and education gap [11]. The legacy of racial ideology towards Indigenous Australians still played a crucial role in explaining present inequalities and development gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Both racial ideologies in the US and Australia constructed the subhuman status of the targeted racial minorities, while some subtle differences occur regarding the subhuman status. In American racial ideology, Blacks were considered as properties and objects, and hence their natural rights were denied in favor of property rights. In Australia, Indigenous people were understood as "savages" and their natural existence was not acknowledged through the claims of *terra nullius* and state of nature, hence rights for Indigenous Australians were basically non-existent. Rigid racial boundaries were created for both Indigenous peoples in Australia and African Americans by racial ideologists. Lastly, there are significant differences in terms of the possibilities of alternating racial membership in the two countries. American racial ideology emphasized racial segregation between Blacks and Whites, and Blacks cannot seek to abandon the Black identity by any means, like miscegenation or cultural assimilation. Racial ideology in Australia asserted the possibility to "uplift" the Indigenous race, first by miscegenation with Whites to "purify" the "mixed" Indigenous blood. After World War II, biological absorption was replaced by cultural and social assimilation into the mainstream, White society. All assimilation efforts were designed to obliterate the identities of Indigenous Australians.

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