

**Baden Offord, Erika Kerruish, Rob Garbutt, Adele Wessell and Kirsten Pavlovic, *Inside Australian Culture: Legacies of Enlightenment Values* (Anthem Press, 2014)**

The Enlightenment has of late been charged with negligence on fronts ranging from its being used to entrench racism in post-colonial societies to its problematic effects on our individual sense of self.<sup>1</sup> *Inside Australian Culture: Legacies of Enlightenment Values* focuses on the former, and looks at colonialism as both an Enlightenment legacy and as ‘an ongoing project in Australian public culture’ (2). This book is not so much timely as just overdue. We do fear the other. We fear the other within and without our borders. Despite dissent, Australia worries about asylum seekers. We continue to struggle with acceptance of refugees and migrants. And we are yet to reconcile with our colonial past and the indigenous population. And then there is our anxiety about ‘generic Asia’ (2).

Whether or not you agree that the other is to be worried about for whatever reason (and that is a separate debate to what this book, and this review, takes on), the fact is that the way we are dealing with the other is not productive. Offord et al. argue that the way we currently deal with the other depends on our (now) unconscious subscription to institutionalised, mostly British, Enlightenment traditions – traditions that safeguard historical divisions between White Europeans and everyone else. If we want to change the way we see the other, we need to look at our way of viewing the world and our place in it. This asks us to engage in what the Enlightenment legacy has so far resisted: self-reflection.

The authors of *Inside Australian Culture* have taken it upon themselves to do some of this cultural self-reflection, and what they have found is that Enlightenment values reinforce a colonial, White European national identity at the expense of our obviously – and, if convenient, celebrated – multicultural population. To argue this, Offord et al. have organised this book into three parts, which are bracketed by Ashis Nandy’s foreword and Vinay Lal’s afterword.

Part one looks conceptually at what it means to ‘get inside’ Australian culture. It gives context for how Enlightenment ideas became central to the nation’s colonial, settler project, and shows how these ideas set the terms for our modern nation. This section ends by discussing the difference between the public sphere and public culture, how these two relate to each other, and how they serve to reinforce Enlightenment values (or, more negatively, ‘pathologies of power’) (33).

Part two investigates three moments in Australian history that show these Enlightenment traditions in practice. A chapter each is dedicated to the 1858 inquiry into regulating Chinese immigration, the *Cubillo v. the Commonwealth* case of 2000 that sought justice for two members of the Stolen Generation, and the 2005 Cronulla Riot. These case studies investigate the ethical limits of Enlightenment thinking. One example, presented in relation to *Cubillo v. the Commonwealth* case, is how a legal system designed on British law and Enlightenment principles lacks the flexibility to admit evidence and testimony that draws on memory and communal experience. Overreliance on documented evidence and an empiricist approach to ‘historical fact’ shifts the burden of proof onto individuals like Lorna Cubillo and Peter Gunner, ‘whose only records accorded legal recognition in relation to their childhood [were] the records maintained by [the] government’ that legislated their removal (75).

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Matthew Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: How to Flourish in an Age of Distraction* (London: Viking, 2015)

Book reviews: *Inside Australian Culture: Legacies of Enlightenment Values* by Baden Offord et al. Grace Chipperfield.

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Part three offers concluding remarks on the preceding two sections, and draws on the works of Ashis Nandy, an Indian political psychologist, social theorist, and critic, as a springboard for the authors' discussion of how we might work with the 'necessary other.' The authors allow that Nandy's ideas are not the only way to view the Enlightenment legacy in Australia, but it is true that, as they write, his insights have 'a special clarity' (11) and he engages with Australian culture in a 'nuanced and reflective manner' (10). And the way this book is framed through Nandy's commentary (excerpts from interviews with Nandy across 2007 are used as epigraphs to each chapter) is one of its strengths. The same rhetorical strength can be found in Vinay Lal's closing remarks.

The careful writing of Nandy and Lal throws into relief the parts of *Inside Australian Culture* that read less accessibly. As with any collaborative effort (and as with any effort to distil complex ideas into clear and cohesive writing) there is always the danger of losing sight of the bigger picture. And though the authors self-consciously pre-empt this criticism, and though they go to pains to show how the various moving parts of this book connect with each other, the sections do at times feel stitched together. And though the argument is consistent and often has the clarity it needs – as in much of the presentation of the three case studies – it also often gets obscured by being wordier than necessary. This is why using Nandy as the connective tissue for the book overall is wise. Nandy lends clarity and concision to the authors' argument where sometimes they have prioritised terminology over accessibility.

For scholars whose research makes the terrain of this book familiar territory this will not be a problem. But because the whole point of the book seems to be to ask Australian citizens to look hard at their sense of belonging and their sense of having a national identity, it is important to consider how to make these ideas are accessible to the public. It's one thing to speak to fellow scholars about our national sense of belonging, and another to speak to participants in the Cronulla Riot. I understand that addressing Australia writ large is an unfair task to give the authors of this book, but I think it would be profitable if the authors consider how their ideas can be engaged with more broadly.

The Enlightenment doesn't need to be dismissed as entirely bad and its traditions do not need to be entirely rejected, but the value system that informs and directs Australian culture does need to be looked at closely. As Nandy says, 'even those who disagree with the main thesis of this book will also gain much from the effort' made to consider the argument (ix). If we can't see, if we can't remain aware of, how our cultural inheritance is effectively preventing our understanding of and ability to work with the other, then we will stay stuck in the past.

This book is overtly of the humanist tradition, which is, I think, good and necessary. Nandy writes in his foreword: 'human beings, given enough time, opportunity and a culture of impunity, can turn any theory of salvation – secular or nonsecular – into its opposite' (vii). The Enlightenment project prioritised a system of values based on reason. The project for the authors of *Inside Australian Culture* is to suggest a way to balance this value system with compassion and empathy (xi). This project is important, not *only* in this day and age but also, yes, certainly, in this day and age.

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