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# OFF-RESERVATION BOARDING SCHOOL VERSUS THE STOLEN GENERATIONS

A Comparative Study on Indigenous Educational Policies  
in the United States and Australia  
during the Assimilation Period

This paper probes into what ideas were behind two horrid incidents in western history—Off-Reservation Boarding School in the United States and the Stolen Generations in Australia—by comparing the policies and practices that the American and Australian governments adopted during the forced assimilation period with respect to indigenous children. The similarities in the background, the theoretical basis, the involvement of Christianity and the measures taken by both governments, are thus revealed.

By reflecting on history, it is possible to avoid making mistakes in the future. On Feb. 13<sup>th</sup> 2008, the Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, made a formal apology to the Stolen Generations for the past crimes, mistakes and sufferings caused by the whites against Australian indigenous peoples:

We apologize especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country. For the pain, suffering and hurt of these stolen generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry (Rudd, 2008).

This apology, which had been demanded by the indigenous population for many years, has aroused great interest among people who would like to look at that part of history. What had the Australian government done to the indigenous children, the so-called Stolen Generations, under the assimilation policies?

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At the same time, one cannot ignore the fact that on the American Continent, similar abuse was the share of the American Indian children in Off-Reservation Boarding Schools. In fact, similarities between the indigenous educational policies of the United States and Australia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century are nothing short of striking.<sup>1</sup>

In both cases, as part of the assimilation policies adopted by the two governments, the Indigenous children were removed from their families and communities, and were kept isolated from their own cultures. They were taught and trained in the western way for them to melt into white society.

#### THE SIMILARITIES IN THE EDUCATION OF INDIGENOUS CHILDREN IN THE US AND AUSTRALIA

Indigenous assimilation and the education of indigenous children in both countries occurred almost in the same period—from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—and they have much in common. Although the Australian government officially adopted the assimilation policies in the 1910s, the removal and education of Indigenous children can be traced back to as early as 1869.

#### Failure of Racial Segregation.

Before the European colonists first set foot on the new continents—the American continent and the Australian conti-

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1. Indian Off-Reservation Boarding Schools refers to schools that were established in the United States during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to educate Native American youths according to Euro-American standards. These schools were usually located far away from the Indian reservations ranging from those like the federal Carlisle boarding School, to schools sponsored by religious organizations. Native American children were forced to abandon their Native American identities and adopt European-American culture and the English language. Many cases of sexual, physical and mental abuse were documented as occurring at these schools.

The Stolen Generations (also Stolen children) refers to those children of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, usually of half-caste, who were removed from their families by the Australian Federal and State government agencies and church missions, under acts of their respective parliaments. The removals occurred in the period between approximately 1869 and 1969, although in some places children were still being taken in the 1970s.

ment—the Indigenous people had been living on the two continents for thousands of years, and they had already established their own social structures and cultures. When more and more European settlers arrived, they began to grab lands from the natives by killing them or driving them away from their land to reservations. The living conditions on the reservations were terrible and the Indigenous population declined sharply. In less than a century from its founding, the United States had fulfilled its target of western expansion from the original 13 states along a narrow strip of the Atlantic coast in the East across the American continent to the Pacific coast in the West. In Australia, likewise, the Aborigines were driven to the northwestern part of the continent, where most of the land was desert.

However, brutal treatment of the natives was criticized by more and more people, especially when it came to be regarded as contrary to the doctrines of Christianity. Therefore, with time, the whites put an end to atrocities towards the indigenous peoples. In the mid and late 19<sup>th</sup> century, because of diseases, killings, and the shrinking of their territories, indigenous peoples were no longer a major threat to the whites, so the governments employed policies of racial segregation, hoping that living within the restricted limits of the reservations the indigenous peoples would soon die out. However, that was not the case: indigenous people as a group would prevent further land-grabbing, which in itself would frequently resulted in occasional escalations of conflicts between the whites and the natives. At the same time, indigenous peoples continued to fight for their rights, as a result of which the governments had to change their policies and find new ways to deal with the problem.

### The 'Noble Savage'

A major development occurred when the dominant attitude towards indigenous people changed among some social scientists and politicians, especially since indigenous people started to be regarded as 'noble savages' (Prucha, 1986: 2) capable of accepting western civilization.

On the American continent, among the first generation of statesmen, Thomas Jefferson had his own idea about the Indigenous people. In 1785 he wrote: 'I believe the Indian then to be in body

and mind equal to the white man.' He insisted that the mentality of Indians was equal to that of the whites in similar situations. And he quoted from the famous speech of Chief Logan, declaring that the whole orations of Demosthenes and Cicero could not produce a single passage superior to the chief's oratory. Physically, the Indians were as smart as the whites. They were brave, active, and affectionate. He pointed out that if the circumstances of their lives were appropriately changed, the Indians would be transformed (Prucha, 1986: 2). 'The ultimate point of rest & happiness for them is to let our settlements and theirs meet and blend together, to intermix, and become one people' (Prucha, 1986: 2). Jefferson and his contemporaries thought that the process of civilizing the Indians could be accelerated by radical changes in the conditions of the Indian society, and they set out to bring about those changes.

In Australia, similar thoughts were popular and social Darwinism became the theoretical basis for the education of the Indigenous children especially for half-caste Aboriginal children. But it was not a natural selection, it was an artificial selection in which only the half-caste were to be saved while the full-blood would die out.

Operating under the principles of the Enlightenment and of Christian philanthropy, government officials proposed to bring civilization to indigenous peoples and to change them and their cultural patterns—that is to bring about the assimilation of the Natives.

### Social Darwinism

In the 1880s, Social Darwinism was widely accepted in the West, much as it differed from Darwin's natural selection—the survival of the fittest. The 'natural' mechanism of Darwinism consisted in the competition—or the struggle—of some organisms against others. The losers in the competition would have few or no descendants. Darwinism was a scientific concept describing a process whose outcomes would be independent of either human or divine intervention.

The importance of Social Darwinism, however, was emphasized in the writings of many prominent scholars, such as Richard

Broome, who would claim that “the survival of the fittest” seemed to explain what many white people already believed; that some races are better than others, and the weaker ones faded away’ (Broome, 1994). Another scholar, Andrew Markus, correctly distinguished between the work of Charles Darwin, who was primarily concerned with biological change, and writers such as Herbert Spencer, who focused more on social evolution. He claimed that, during the 1880s, the diffusion of social Darwinism in Australia provided colonists with a world view which gave race the primacy of place (Francis).

Social Darwinism referred to theories of cultural change. Cultural evolutionary theories were often not concerned with the biological survival of individuals, but with the disappearance of the customs, religions and technology of a people. This distinction is historically important. For example, it was a theory of cultural evolution which promoted the idea that indigenous people should be transformed into Christian workers which meant that the individuals would survive while their culture was eradicated. The biological individuals, or their descendants, would be part of a more developed culture. Some nineteenth-century scientists and social scientists, including followers of Herbert Spencer, believed that indigenous culture would fade away, but they did not see this as part of a competition between individual numbers of different races (Francis).

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Darwinian social evolution had been used as the theoretical basis for the assimilation of Indian children in the United States. Social Darwinism was adopted by many intellectuals and politicians to justify their ideas, policies and actions for advanced and civilized nations to repress the backward and uncivilized nations in the assimilation period (Hoxie, 1984). American anthropologist and social theorist Lewis Henry Morgan elaborated upon his theory of social evolution in his 1877 book *Ancient Society*. Looking across the vast span of human existence, Morgan presented three major human stages: savagery, barbarism, and civilization (Moses, 2009). He would argue that the European white was at the top of the pyramid, while American Indians were at the bottom (Adams, 1995: 15). Although he showed great sympathy to the Indians, Morgan still thought Indians

were not able to change on their own. Thomas Jefferson's version of the concept of the 'noble savage' indicates that Indians lived in a lower stage of social advancement, and that white education could accelerate the process (Axtell, 1995; Sheehan, 1996). In Australia, until quite recently there was a general belief that the so-called 'full-blood' Aboriginal people would gradually die out and be survived by the 'fitter' white race.

For a long time, the primary purpose of administration was to avoid the 'natural' outcomes of the so-called Social Darwinism, that is, outcomes which would cause the Aborigines to disappear in competition with the settlers. They were in favor of artificial selection. The attempt to control sexual relations between Aborigines and members of other ethnic groups was an attempt to substitute artificial selection for 'natural selection.' The breeding policy was made for the half-caste population to be 'bred-up' white over a few generations. As for half-caste, the policy of the government was to encourage the intermarriage with whites. 'The object being to breed out the color as far as possible' (Australian Archives, 1933). This was artificial selection and control, not natural selection: the Commonwealth government was unwilling to let nature take its course.

In both countries, indigenous educational policies were based mainly on Darwinian social evolution, whose proponents insisted that the indigenous peoples were inferior to the European colonists—thus they would either die out or be assimilated. Indigenous educational policy had to reflect the projected reality of the disappearance of the Indigenous way of life in a short period of time.

As follows, indigenous education was built upon the premise that the native peoples had a great deal to learn from the white men, who represented the highest level of achievement reached in the evolutionary process. The task of indigenous peoples was to consume bits and pieces of the white man's world in the expectation that some day they would become as smart. The idea was that since English was regarded the greatest, most powerful and most prosperous language in the world (Prucha, 1986), indigenous children should give up their own languages totally and learn to speak English instead.

## Racism

In this manner, Social Darwinism provided the philosophical justification for racism in both countries and thus also the assimilations of the indigenous peoples was greatly impacted by racist prejudices. American Indians and Australian Aborigines were treated as uncivilized and inferior races. When reading the laws concerning indigenous people, we will be inevitably reminded of the race-based legislation concerning the Jewish people under the Nazi regime in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. The purpose and content were the same: to enable the total destruction of a racially defined group of people and to establish an all-white America and Australia. Captain Richard C. Pratt, who opened the first Bureau of Indian Affairs and who run a boarding school in the United States in 1879, once said: 'Kill the Indian, save the man,' which means that exterminating the Native population and killing the spirit and culture of the Indians so that Native American nations would no longer exist would provide living space for the 'true man,' white by default. In Australia, from about 1870 to 1950, the policies leading to the removals of Aboriginal children from their families were designed to separate the half-caste from full-blood children so that the latter would disappear as quickly as possible. The philosophy was simple: as a racially defined group, American Indian and Australian Aborigines should vanish from the face of the planet.

## The Involvement of Christianity

The role that Christianity played in the implementation of governmental policies should not be ignored. Wherever the colonists went, they were followed (or preceded) by missionaries. During the period of colonization, missionaries were sent to the tribes all over the countries so as to convert the native people to Christianity. During the assimilation period, many boarding schools and children's homes were established and run by various denominations. While at these schools or children's homes, indigenous children were forced to give up not only their life styles and languages, but also their beliefs. They were generally forbidden



to speak their native languages, taught Christianity instead of their native religions, and in numerous other ways forced to abandon their own identity and adopt the white culture. The missionaries had a faith in essential humanity and believed that with proper education indigenous children would in time be raised to take their place in a modern Christian society (Read, 2006: 35).

In the United States, the movement to reform Indian administration and assimilate Indians as citizens originated in the pleas of people who lived in close association with the natives. They called themselves 'Friends of the Indians' and lobbied with officials on their behalf. Gradually the call for change was taken up by reformers in the east part of the country. Many of the reformers were Protestant Christians who considered assimilation necessary to the Christianizing of the Indians. The nineteenth century was a time of major efforts in evangelizing missionary expeditions to all non-Christian people. In 1865, the government began to make contracts with various missionary societies to operate Indian schools for teaching citizenship, English, and the agricultural and mechanical arts. The goal of the United States government was to make Native Americans assimilate into the dominant white culture. Some called this 'making apples,' as the Indians would still appear 'red' on the outside, but would be made 'white' on the inside.

By and large, most government officials believed in the virtue of Christianity, and worked to convert American Indians to Christianity and suppress the practice of native religions. Since spiritual leaders were perceived as leaders of anti-white uprisings, even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they ran the risk of jail sentences of up to 30 years for simply practicing their rituals. The law did not change until the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) of 1978, although, admittedly, the government had stopped prosecuting Native American spiritual leaders before then.

Because of the close relationship between federal Indian policy and American churches during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Christianity has a long, important and tumultuous history in some parts of the Indian territories. Driven by a belief in the necessity of converting Indians, and openly supported

by federal policy makers, missionaries arrived as early as the 1820s, convinced, as Henry Warner Bowden has written, 'that one set of cultural standards the one shared by churchmen and politicians promoted both spiritual progress and national stability' (Bowden, 1981: 164-165). As a result, church leaders and politicians alike believed that conversion to Christianity would quickly, humanely, and permanently solve the Indian question.

By the 1850s, missions flourished in the eastern half of the Indian Territory (later to become the state of Oklahoma) especially among the Five Civilized Tribes. Following removals, missionaries reestablished churches and mission stations in the Indian Territory, often in tandem with schools and academies.

Between the end of the Civil War and the 1890s federal policy makers and mission groups intensified their efforts in the western half of Indian Territory. In 1869, federal officials inaugurated the Peace Policy, a church-led, reservation-based assimilation program rooted in the belief that missionaries were the most effective agents of the government's civilizing agenda. By the late nineteenth century every mainstream denomination, including the Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Mennonites, Quakers, and Catholics, had mission stations on Oklahoma's reservations.

In Australia, in common with other white colonists, missionaries at times regarded the Australian Aborigines as passive beings with no culture, no history, and no spiritual traditions of their own. Therefore, the indigenous people were to be 'uplifted' to white standards of living and Christian beliefs and practices. Catholic missions were established even in the most isolated places, and were always desperately short of personnel and financial resources, with hardships unimaginable to other Australian Catholics. Aboriginal children were forced to go to those missions to be taken care of and to be taught and trained in the western way. Sometimes they had to take a long journey to missions in coastal Broome or Beagle Bay. In 1814, the missionary William Shelley set up the first Australian Aboriginal School in the continent. William Shelley persuaded the governor to approve his plan to establish an institution for Aboriginal children in western Sydney in 1814. He believed

human nature to be the same irrespective of race—'God hath made one blood all nations of men' (Acts 17:26).

### Forced Assimilation

In most cases, indigenous children were forced to leave their parents and were forbidden to speak their native languages; they were taught Christianity, denied the right to practice their native religions, and coerced into obedience in numerous other ways. The practice, needless to say, was against the will of both the indigenous children and their parents.

After the Civil War, the American federal government emphasized assimilation as a central theme of its multiple policies towards American Indians. The mandatory sending of Indian children to schools, particularly Off-Reservation Boarding Schools, became one of the key methods of assimilating Native American people into the mainstream culture of white America. The education of young Indians came to the forefront in 1860. Approximately 100,000 Native American children were placed in BIA-managed boarding schools over the past century. In order to force the Indians to send their children to boarding schools, the government adopted many measures. For example, if Indian parents refused to send their children to schools, they would be denied subsidies from the government. Sometimes, troops would be sent to round up as many of the Indian children as they could. Many of these children were not only physically abused, but also, stripped of their cultural identity, abused mentally. Children were forced to give up Indian names, stop speaking their own language, and have their long braids cut off. Violating the rules, they would be punished. Some children attempted to run away, but in most cases they would be caught, taken back to school, and severely punished.

In Australia, even babies would be taken away from their mothers. It was the government that decided they would receive the white man's education by force. It was believed that once removed from their parents and cut off from their cultural environment, the children of the natives would become uprooted more easily. Most of the Aboriginal children were under five

years old, and there was rarely any judicial process to give them relief. To be Aboriginal was reason enough for them to be taken by force or by stealth from the bush and into isolated places. For this reason, these children are still known as the 'Stolen Generations'. Then they would be taken to orphanages or boarding schools, and sometimes they would be fostered or adopted by white parents. Not infrequently, they would be told that they were orphans and, effectively, they would lose contact with their parents for ever.

In Australia, such measures were implemented in order to facilitate the anticipated Darwinian social evolution. The policy of removing all 'half-caste' children, even babies, from their Aboriginal families and placing them with white caregivers was legally instituted and carried out. The Federal Government insisted that children of mixed blood heritage be removed from the 'savage/primitive' influence of 'full-blood Aboriginals,' with the intended result being their assimilation into Australian society. From 1910 to 1970, at least 100,000 Aboriginal children were taken away from their homes, and many of them underwent physical and sexual abuse. On a regular basis, under the guardianship of the whites, Aboriginal children would be coerced into obedience by means of various forms of corporeal punishment. Undernourished, abused and living in poor conditions, these children received little education: they were expected to go into low grade domestic and farming work.

#### THE EFFECTS OF INDIGENOUS ASSIMILATION

The indigenous assimilation policies turned out to be a failure in both countries, for both the United States and Australian governments would violate human rights in their treatment of natives over many generations and in a multitude of ways.

The policy of forced assimilation inflicted harmful and lasting effects upon the Indigenous populations and communities. Forced boarding school programs in the early 1900s tried to strip indigenous children of their cultures and languages in the name of assimilation. The removal of children over several generations

has left much of the indigenous community with an intensive sense of distrust, fear and anger towards the dominant society.

Furthermore, as the indigenous children fell victim to the assimilation campaigns, this institutionalization had a profound effect on their identity when they grew up. It was difficult for them to fit into either the white, or the native world. The assimilation policy alienated them for life. Separating children from their extended families created a vacuum in their own cultural knowledge, and a subsequent ignorance of how to parent their own children. The long term effects were, for some, madness and death, and for others—desolation and misery handed down from one generation to the next (Read, 2006).

In Australia, many of the Stolen Generations did not even know where they had come from. Seeking and finding their original families, continuing to reconnect with its extended circles and with the whole community often marks the beginning of a painful journey back home (Kinneer, 2000).

Both American Indians and Australian Aborigines were outraged by the campaigns and they fought for their rights. Finally, the governments in both countries realized that the only way to solve the problem was to respect the native people's cultures and give indigenous people their rights to self-determination.

## CONCLUSION

When the reality of the impact of having been separated and assimilated into white society really hit home, the indigenous people could reclaim their identity, their lives and their entire sense of belonging. At the same time, they would become aware of the enormous losses and emptiness haunting their lives. An honest acknowledgement of the cruel laws and practices of the past that forcibly removed the indigenous children from their homes would help to ensure that racist wrongs will never be repeated and that human rights will always be protected, for one and all, across all barriers of time, space and race.

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