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G.J. Ashworth, Brian Graham and J.E. Tunbridge
Pluralising Pasts: Heritage, Identity and Place in Multicultural Societies
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REVIEW

In February this year the newly elected Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd stood up at Parliament House in Canberra to say sorry.¹ His apology was addressed to the Stolen Generations – people like Nungala Fejo who, as a four year old child in 1932, was forcibly taken from her family and sent to various Methodist missions. She never saw her mother again. This, Rudd scoffed, was supposedly ‘all in the name of protection.’ His own interpretation was very different. For Rudd the policy that led to around 50,000 Indigenous children being taken from their families between 1910 and 1970 brought with it ‘profound grief, suffering and loss’. Rudd sought to right these wrongs and to use his apology ‘to turn a new page in Australia’s history’. He brought his stirring speech to a close with a rallying call:

So let us turn this page together: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, Government and Opposition, Commonwealth and State, and write this new chapter in our nation’s story together. First Australians, First Fleeters, and

those who first took the Oath of Allegiance just a few weeks ago. Let's grasp this opportunity to craft a new future for this great land: Australia.

These words are both an acknowledgement and a celebration of diversity within one nation state. Indeed, it is this very plurality that will, Rudd believes, make Australia 'great' – by which he means a truly equitable society built around the principle of 'a fair go for all.' That this is *not* currently the case was emphasised by Rudd when he drew attention to a 17-year shorter life expectancy and four-fold higher rate of infant mortality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in contemporary Australia. Rudd's way of saying sorry to the Stolen Generations is to promise to take better care of today's Aboriginal children, principally by improving their education and therefore their life chances.

This familiar link between history and politics set within the context of a nation struggling to come to terms with diversity finds its apogee in Rudd's speech. He gave it just as I began to read *Pluralising Pasts: Heritage, Identity and Place in Multicultural Societies*. The topicality and importance of the themes this book addresses were confirmed upon hearing Rudd's oratory. It is difficult to think of a more eloquent example of 'the sense of the past being a hard-edged political resource' (p.62). Rudd's pre-emptive attack on those who would interpret his words as a jaundiced, 'black-armband view of history' is an allusion to the intense 'history wars' that have taken place in Australia.²

The past is, then, contested – a fact that is underscored by the aptly titled *Pluralising Pasts*. This work is effectively divided into two halves: a 'conceptual context' followed by 'a typology of plural societies'. The latter is then fleshed out and applied to a range of examples. The typologies consist of five 'models' intended to provide 'an aid to understanding the complexity of the reality of plural societies' (p.86). They

are the 'assimilatory', 'melting pot', 'core+', 'pillar' and 'salad bowl' models (with the first and last manifesting some variations on the same theme). The authors confess that these models are 'somewhat arbitrary in taxonomy... and may convey a spurious and misleading uniformity.' (p.86)

Despite these reservations the models do provide a reasonably effective framework for addressing the case studies set out in the final part of the book. Inevitably in a publication of this nature some of the examples are more fully developed than others. The reader is taken on a whistle-stop tour of various places known to the three authors. Thus we dash from the Philippines to New Lanark in Scotland in the space of two pages (pp.133-135). It might have been better to concentrate on fewer sites and delve into the issues in greater depth. Also, it was disappointing (although not entirely unexpected) that the authors should 'have consciously eschewed a detailed discussion of policy management' (p.207). This is, however, not entirely true. They, for instance, ponder whether the lessons of 'importing a neutral core culture' to Singapore (p.161) or Switzerland's '26 different cultural pillars' (p.177) might provide models for conflict resolution in areas of discord, such as the divided island of Cyprus (p.161).

One example that I felt did not do justice to the rest of the book was the brief reference to Malta (pp.115-116). It is presented as 'a strongly cohesive society' that 'is remarkably uniform'. This results in 'a clear and distinct identity unique to the island group'. What role does this example have in a book on pluralism and multiculturalism? The answer seems to be that difference is apparent in the 'quite different messages' promoted by Malta's heritage and tourism. One is in English for an external audience and focuses on Malta's 'global links'. 'The local is', on the other hand, 'irrelevant and literally unintelligible to outsiders'. But where is the evidence for this? Any English-speaking visitor can reach for *The Times of Malta* if they wish

to engage in ‘the local’. And there are two very pressing ‘local’ issues that trouble many ‘outsiders’: Malta’s highly controversial ‘heritage’ of bird hunting and the internment for up to eighteen months of migrants from north Africa. Both these matters have risen in significance since Malta joined the European Union in 2004. An exploration of how these issues interact with the Maltese conceptualisation of an apparently uniform heritage and identity merited far greater scrutiny.

But perhaps this is the task of the reader. *Pluralising Pasts* succeeds in raising a host of questions, provides some methods for answering them, and encourages reflection on issues of pressing global importance. Reading it helped me contextualise Kevin Rudd’s speech mentioned at the start.³ It also dispelled any doubt that the past is a neglected or marginalised field of interest. In his address to parliament Rudd fretted that history risked being left ‘languishing with the historians, the academics and the cultural warriors’. *Pluralising Pasts* suggests that he has little to worry about.

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Notes

¹ All references to this speech are taken from ‘Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples’, House of Representatives, Parliament House, Canberra, 13 February 2008. Available at: http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2008/speech_0073.cfm (accessed May 8, 2008).

² For the counter-argument to the larger contention that ‘Australia had committed genocide against the Aborigines’, see Keith Windschuttle’s ‘Introduction’ to *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One: Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847*, Sydney, Macleay Press, 2005, pp. 1-10.

³ Rudd’s speech can be seen as a further affirmation that, diversity ‘can be expressed only within ‘an overriding commitment to Australia and the basic structures of structures and values of Australian democracy’’ (Lewis and Neal cited in Ashworth et al, p. 26).