

Windschuttle, History Warriors and Real Historians

By Dirk Moses

Readers of this site will know that Andrew G. Bonnell, an historian at the University of Queensland, subjected a recent newspaper column (“Tutorials in Terrorism”, *The Australian*, March 16, 2005) by the freelance media commentator, Keith Windschuttle to withering critique.

Why was this necessary?

Windschuttle, Bonnell argued, had misled the public once again about important matters of current political and historical interest, in particular, regarding my new, edited book, [*Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*](#). In the context of the enduring “[history wars](#)”, Bonnell (readers should be aware that Bonnell and his colleague, Martin Crotty, have written an excellent analysis of the history wars, called “An Australian ‘Historikerstreit’?” in the *Australian Journal of Politics and History*) thought it was important to set the record straight.

After all, the editorial of *The Australian* on March 16, 2005, based foursquare on Windschuttle’s screed, said our universities lacked a “moral compass” and accused its “publicly funded intelligentsia” of “woolly-mindedness”. It continued, “Having long ago substituted “critique” for reason, and even after everything that has happened during the past 3 ½ years, the intellectuals cannot grasp that the West and its democratic values are under attack from an insidious new fascism”. Plainly, the stakes are high - no less than the survival of western civilisation itself. And the implications are clear: we academics are apologists for or soft on “an insidious new fascism”.

Given this extraordinary and ugly accusation, it is important that readers are apprised of the salient facts. This is the aim of what I write here. We must start with Windschuttle. The first part of his invective was not directed at my book, but rather at a conference invitation of the University of Sydney to Antonio Negri. (For the necessary information that corrects Windschuttle’s contorted account of the matter, go [here](#).) His account of my book was equally contorted, as Bonnell shows.

In his column, Windschuttle pointed out that a number of chapters in *Genocide and Settler Society*, including my own, refer to the scholarly work of [Ward Churchill](#), the Native American scholar and activist who recently achieved notoriety for his article, *Some People Push Back: The Justice of Roosting Chickens*, after the 9-11 attacks in the US.

Churchill, who teaches at the University of Colorado, Boulder, is well-known among scholars of Native American history and genocide studies as a strident and uncompromising advocate of the Indigenous perspective and critic of the west. With characteristic rhetorical exaggeration, he adorned his otherwise standard, leftist argument that the terrorist attacks had been the predictable consequence of US foreign policy with the infelicitous phrase that many of the dead in the twin-towers had been “little Eichmanns”.

With this expression, Churchill wanted to imply that they - and the US - were not innocent victims, but also that they were engaged in a criminal enterprise (more on this below). As might be expected, this article - when it was discovered a few years after its writing - struck many Americans as an outrageous slur on the country and those who had died on 9-11. Conservative politicians and activists maintain he supports terrorism, and are now calling for Churchill's sacking. (He replies to critics [here](#).)

Windschuttle's ploy is obvious: he is attempting to discredit my book by asserting that it is informed by Churchill's views about genocide in Tasmania. "Meanwhile in Australia," he wrote, "Churchill is being presented as a scholarly authority on the Aborigines. In the newly released anthology *Genocide and Settler Society*, editor Dirk Moses of the University of Sydney's history department quotes Churchill's 1997 book *A Little Matter of Genocide* as one of his main sources on the Tasmanian Aborigines. Churchill compares the fate of the Tasmanians with that of the Jews at the hands of the Nazis."

Since Bonnell has demonstrated already how Windschuttle misrepresented the book, let's examine my exchange with Windschuttle. My letter to the editor the next day stated:

Keith Windschuttle (Opinion, 16/3) wants readers to think that my book, "Genocide and Settler Society", approves of Ward Churchill's depiction of the British settlement of Tasmania as akin to the Holocaust. In fact, Churchill is cited as an "extreme incarnation" of the anti-imperial approach to writing about colonialism. One of the targets of the book is "wild analogies with Nazi genocide" like those of Churchill.

This correction forced the following admission from Windschuttle 24 hours later in *The Australian*: "True, Moses disagrees with Churchill that indigenous genocide was a murderous conspiracy." Naturally, though, he must have the last word, and so he accuses me of being "deceptive" in my quoting: "Moses's letter claims his book criticises Churchill for making wild analogies with Nazi genocide. However, the book targets that phrase not at Churchill but at journalist Phillip Knightley." Once again, he is wrong. Here is what I wrote:

Journalists and popular writers made use of this "revisionist" scholarship for moral-political purposes. In thrall to the "perpetrator trauma" - the shock of realisation at the crimes committed by one's compatriots - such writers urged Australians to face up to their dark past, which they depicted in simplistic terms of good and evil...The Gorgon Effect - the freezing of the imagination - was evident when they occasionally made wild analogies with Nazi genocide, such as the journalist Phillip Knightley's naïve exclamation ...

It is obvious that my chapter disapproves of "wild analogies with Nazi genocide" in general, and cites Knightly as but one example. That Churchill is included in this criticism is also obvious from the earlier reference to his views as an "extreme" example of the anti-imperial attitude to history writing. I shan't speculate whether Windschuttle has problems with reading comprehension or wilfully distorts my meaning, but I was not surprised by his tactic. Falsey accusing Australian historians of exaggerating claims of genocide and Holocaust in Australia in order to paint them as ideologically-driven is now common among history warriors.

For instance, Windschuttle omitted to mention an article (“An Antipodean Genocide?” *Journal of Genocide Research*) I wrote in 2000 that argues against the genocide concept for Tasmania from his book [*The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*](#) although I had sent it to him and we had corresponded about it on email. Of course, to acknowledge it would have undermined his headline-grabbing assertion that historians were wilfully perverting the Australian past by engaging in heedless exaggeration.

What is more significant is that he can only insist that I prefer Churchill to Arendt, whom he reveres as an anti-totalitarian thinker, by concealing from readers that I have written about both of them, criticising the former and praising the latter. For instance, in “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the ‘Racial Century’”, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 36:2 (2002), 7-36. (The footnotes are omitted here.)

To begin with, is it really satisfactory to equate cultural genocide and physical extermination? Few deny that the former is ‘horrible’, as Zannis, Davis, and Churchill insist, but this equation defies deeply-held intuitions that probably precede the Holocaust, and I wonder whether it would command a majority. And is Lemkin really an authority for the inclusion of cultural genocide in the core definition of genocide? He explicitly rejected denationalisation as a synonym for genocide because it did not connote biological destruction of a people. His listing of cultural measures that destroyed a people are subtended by the intention to eradicate biologically, not merely to deculturate, them. What befell the Jews, he thought, ultimately awaited many Slavic peoples even if less totally, and sure enough the Germans did indeed intend to starve tens of millions of Slavs to reduce the number of useless eaters to make room for the colonisation of ethnic Germans. Bauer and Churchill both misread him on this point. Of course, by insisting on cultural genocide as the core of genocide per se, the link to colonialism is much easier to establish, especially in relation to policies of assimilation after the conquest of Indigenous resistance. It is open to question, also, whether by insisting on its equal status, post-liberalists ignore the dynamic relations between cultural and physical genocide, namely, the potential for escalation from the one to the other when the former is successfully resisted, or the de-escalation to the former when Indigenous have been pacified.

Which leads to the static nature of most post-liberal theories. They either posit a checklist of features akin to the liberal love of typologies or, in their radical mode, make a straight equation between settler colonialism and the Holocaust based on the formal criteria of the common striving for living space based on the European sense of racial superiority. Does the concurrence of such formal criteria prove the substantial similarity between the nineteenth century colonisation projects of western, liberal states and Nazi imperialism in eastern Europe? One could object that the differences are also significant. The one was totalitarian, the other liberal enough that a Native American like Ward Churchill could eventually occupy an academic position at a state university of the perpetrator society (University of Colorado, Boulder). Here, too, the question of theodicy is apparent. The reluctance to advocate western civilisation as the good that redeems Indigenous suffering is understandable. In light of the knowledge about the fatal impact of colonisation on Indigenous peoples, who can now preach that gratitude is the appropriate response to the blessings of this civilisation? But it is not necessary to commend this theodicy to insist that distinctions be made: Nazi universities did not hire the people it conquered and exterminated.

Again, that omission is not surprising, because it would prevent his pompous arrogation of her thought to his cause, and his claim that I and the authors in the book rely uncritically on an extremist.

What is more, if Windschuttle actually understood Arendt, he may have been somewhat more circumspect, for she is not the uncritically pro-Western thinker he thinks she is; in fact, as Bonnell points out also, her writing is the source of the current trend to link colonialism to Nazism and the Holocaust, that is, precisely the connection that Windschuttle resists strenuously. I analysed her arguments to this effect three years ago (“Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the ‘Racial Century’”)

*Racial extinction, then, was a common notion in Europe long before the Holocaust. But if claims of Australian or American Holocausts are hyperbolic, is it possible nonetheless to relate colonial genocides to the mass exterminations of the twentieth century, in particular, to that of European Jewry? It is if they are linked as constituents of a unified process. The earliest attempt to conceptualise them as a totality is Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). It is customary at conferences now to refer to her linkage of imperialism (to which she devotes a third of her book) and the Holocaust, but so far only promissory notes have been issued, although historians like Jürgen Zimmerer are on the case. What is striking about Arendt's explanatory strategy is her mediation of structural and cultural methods. Eschewing the intuitive and popular approach of seeking the roots of fascism in German history alone, she thematised European history as a whole to lay bare the various crises caused by modernisation. Central to her analysis is what she calls “the political emancipation of the bourgeoisie”, a concept fundamental both to imperialism and totalitarianism. “Imperialism must be considered the first state in political rule of the bourgeoisie rather than the last stage of capitalism”. Contrary to modernisation theorists who regarded incomplete bourgeois revolutions as the misdevelopment that led to fascism, Arendt saw the gradual increase in political power of the rising middle after the mid-nineteenth century as the key issue. For this class sought to use politics to expedite its economic aims, namely, to transcend the limits of the nation-state for the world-wide investment of its capital, and to cast the world after its own image. She held this development to be disastrous, for as is well-known, Arendt regarded the bourgeoisie as the agent of “the social”, the realm of material necessity, counterpoised to “the political”, which she prized as the space of collective decision-making that guaranteed human autonomy and freedom. The odium of imperialism, then, inhered in the occlusion of the political realm by the social, with the consequence that the bourgeois political universe, exemplified and first articulated by Thomas Hobbes, began to infect politics: the world became Hobbesian as brutal competition and racist domination replaced citizenship.*

But that is not all. Arendt implied that totalitarianism is a radicalised form of the “moderate imperialism” whose unrelenting and limitless striving for world domination was always fettered by the nation state before 1914.

“National institutions resisted throughout the brutality and megalomania of imperialist aspirations, and bourgeois attempts to use the state and its instruments of violence for its own economic purposes were always only half successful. This changed when the German

bourgeoisie staked everything on the Hitler movement and aspired to rule with the help of the mob” (p. 124).

*What Arendt is arguing bears closely on the previous discussion of theories of colonial genocide, for her vision of the modern pathology is that society (i.e., the bourgeoisie) gradually takes over the state and uses it for social rather than political ends; indeed, that totalitarianism is the apogee of that process. Clearly, liberal theorists of genocide and totalitarianism misunderstand Arendt if they read her as the authority for their propositions, as she is arguing that the totalitarian energy which produces the concentration camps emanates from the imperatives of the economic system. And yet, although there is an obvious post-liberal dimension to her account, she is interested in showing how this energy became embodied in ideology and state policies. What she achieves, then, is a sublation of liberal and post-liberal positions that incorporates the insights of both into a new perspective, the ideal methodological advance in the philosophy of the social sciences. Similarly, the universal and particular are carefully negotiated. Rather than taking a “special path” to modernity or standing apart *sui generis* from the other European powers, it is the exemplar of an experience they all underwent in varying degrees of intensity. Germany is the country where this process occurred most radically.*

There are good reasons today to revise central features of Arendt’s account. Her talk of “the mob” is anachronistic, her views on the Jewish question quixotic, the concept of totalitarianism is suspect, the section on imperialism is based on the superceded views of Hobson and Lenin, and the contention false that empires weakened nation states. But such superannuation is normal for a book written over fifty years ago. What is significant is Arendt’s dazzling deployment of the full ensemble of modern sociological categories to track the emergence of modern extermination. What she produced was not a contribution to the stale debate between structure and agency, based as it is on an atomistic world view in which causation and independent/dependent variables are supposed to explain this or that outcome. Nor did she write a conventional synthesis in which the narrative shows how “one thing led to another”. The Origins of Totalitarianism is a phenomenology of modernity in same way that Ernst Nolte’s Three Faces of Fascism traces the evolution of fascism in the context of endogenous dynamics in Europe since the Enlightenment. Their point is not to identify a single causal variable, nor to expose static structures, but to lay bare the radicalisation of a system. By this method, the nation-state is not the “sovereign ontological subject” of explanation, yet neither is it discarded as an agent in the historical process in the manner of world systems theory. Vertically distinctive national histories are only explicable in relation to the broader processes that a horizontally integrative history can better provide. Scholars in genocide studies need to look carefully at methodological developments in world history.

If one reads Jürgen Zimmerer’s chapter in my book, you can also see how Arendt’s views are highly uncongenial to Windschuttle’s British imperial pride.

I shan’t elaborate on other major differences between Arendt and Windschuttle, such as his suspicion of republicanism in Western thought (see his vanity [website](#) for his non-peer reviewed “articles” and reviews) and Arendt’s championing of precisely this tradition (for example *On Revolution*). Or his stunning blindness to Churchill’s own use of Arendt. The term “little Eichmanns” is derived of course from her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which she coined the

term “the banality of evil” to depict how an ordinary bourgeois like Adolf Eichmann could commit the crimes he did. Her answer is that his “thoughtlessness” and zealous devotion to duty as the bureaucratic organiser of Jewish deportations to the death camps blinded him to the moral enormity of his actions. That is precisely the point that Churchill wants to make about the administrators of global capitalism and US power in the twin towers. This is what he wrote:

True enough, they were civilians of a sort. But innocent? Gimme a break. They formed a technocratic corps at the very heart of America's global financial empire - the mighty engine of profit to which the military dimension of U.S. policy has always been enslaved - and they did so both willingly and knowingly. Recourse to ignorance - a derivative, after all, of the word ignore - counts as less than an excuse among this relatively well-educated elite. To the extent that any of them were unaware of the costs and consequences to others of what they were involved in - and in many cases excelling at - it was because of their absolute refusal to see. More likely, it was because they were too busy braying, incessantly and self-importantly, into their cell phones, arranging power lunches and stock transactions, each of which translated, conveniently out of sight, mind and smelling distance, into the starved and rotting flesh of infants (he is referring to the Iraqi victims of US bombing in the 1991 first Gulf war, and the subsequent embargo: DM). *If there was a better, more effective, or in fact any other way of visiting some penalty befitting their participation upon the little Eichmanns inhabiting the sterile sanctuary of the twin towers, I'd really be interested in hearing about it.*

Whether Churchill makes legitimate use of Arendt is a matter for debate, but Windschuttle does not even raise the issue because he cannot see that Churchill is drawing on Arendt.

In view of his misunderstanding of and ignorance about Arendt, Windschuttle’s reference to her work is simply embarrassing. But should we be surprised? Like other history warriors - think of columnists such as Christopher Pearson, Andrew Bolt, Paul Sheehan, and Miranda Divine - he does not engage in serious research or reading. Given the tight deadlines, their practice is to trawl the web in search of hot topics for hastily-written opinion pieces. Thus on the basis of google yields they dine out in public as experts, holding forth in an oracular manner and ridiculing the work of academics who have learned the necessary foreign languages, spent months in archives, and conducted fieldwork.

To be sure, Windschuttle ferreted around a few libraries for his book on Tasmania (*The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*), but the technique was effectively the same: rather than devise an original and interesting research question, he relied parasitically on the footnotes of those who have done the hard work in order to check their use of sources. Now that practice is entirely legitimate - as I have argued in two articles in *The Australian*, historians do not have a monopoly on interpreting the national past, and anyone is entitled to check their use of sources. That is why we use footnotes - but it should not be passed off as serious history; in Windschuttle’s hands, it is a debased version of investigative journalism.

The history wars in Australia are characterised by a striking division: ill-informed journalists and creatures of the media (like Windschuttle) versus historians. Nowhere is this problem more apparent than on an episode of Michael Duffy’s interesting ABC radio show, *Counterpoint*, when *The Australian* columnist Christopher Pearson took on Henry Reynolds and my colleague

at Sydney University, Andrew Fitzmaurice. The topic was the doctrine of “terra nullius” in Australian history. Pearson had seized upon a few articles (especially one in *The Bulletin* by an obscure, recent history graduate) which contended that the doctrine was more or less invented by Reynolds and others in order to prepare the way for the Mabo decision. With bullfrog arrogance, Pearson simply reiterated the arguments from these articles as if he were an authority of great learning.

Predictably, he was no match for Reynolds and Fitzmaurice, who have research expertise in the field. Fitzmaurice (*Humanism and America*), a specialist in early modern legal thought on imperialism, was able to show that even if the words “terra nullius” were not used much in the 19th century, the doctrine for which they stand - that Indigenous peoples did not legally own uncultivated land they occupied, and therefore it could be legally claimed by civilised, European powers - saturated contemporary thinking on the subject. Pearson was left floundering, and typically for the history warriors he could not admit that he was out of his depth. It was another embarrassing moment.

Equally typical in these skirmishes is the history warriors’ avoidance of the actual arguments that historians make. Instead, they fall upon a minor point or footnote they think is vulnerable and rush into print to claim the scalp of a historian, or they ignore the main point altogether. For instance, Windschuttle ends his reply to me by simultaneously raising and avoiding the central issue in my book: “Moses argues the more outlandish claim that genocide was intrinsic to the deep structure of settler society.” Nowhere does he explain the nature of my claim or why it is outlandish although surely that is what readers want to hear from him. It’s easier to try to create a scandal by saying I support Churchill. Frankly, this is risible.

The reading public of Australia deserves better than the poisoned gruel dished up by these angry and self-righteous men. I defy them to engage in a debate, public and scholarly, about the substantive claims raised in my book and those of others in the field, like Tony Robert’s new and important monograph on northern Australia, *Frontier Justice: A History of the Gulf Country to 1900*. The public also deserves better than hysterical claims by the country’s only national broadsheet that a “new insidious fascism” threatens Australia. Many in and outside the academy feel that the use of a false alarmism to censor or morally discredit any thinking that does not echo the government line is the real threat to our democracy.