

Taking on the Australian Settler-State:

Sociology for Social Justice and a Critical Indigenous Research Paradigm

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Abstract

The positioning of sociology as a critical response to the continued unfolding of colonisation in Australia could not be more vital. The current climate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander politics demands that we take on the modern Settler-State and enduring structures of marginalisation with Indigenous peoples. This paper seeks to provide the reader with some theoretical foundations of a sociology for social justice. Using structures of the Australian Settler-State as the focus of the critique, this paper outlines a paradigm of a critical Indigenous research methodology to challenge state practice. It calls for continued assessment within the contemporary political arena of the Abbott Coalition Government. Such a research paradigm seeks to: critique structures by talking back to power; foster hope for alternate futures by highlighting the possibilities for change through community agency; and aims for research outcomes which provide practical value for Indigenous peoples and their communities in the self-determination movement. Sociologists have the unique research tools, the passion for social justice, and the prime position to speak back to power in a continued effort to change the world for the better.

Key Words: Indigenous, Activism, Settler-State, Social Justice, Positionality, Methodology.

Undertaking sociological research provides a chance to go beyond the philosophical understanding of the world, and rather, to hope to change it for the better (Marx 1978:145). In the current arena of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander politics the positioning of sociology as a response to the ongoing effects of Australian colonialism is vital. In working with Indigenous peoples, organisations, and communities, sociologists need to challenge the dominant structures of the modern Australian Settler-State. The Australian Settler-State is one established upon removal and exclusion of Indigenous peoples which continues in various forms in the present-day. Critical perspectives are required in order for discriminatory and continuing oppressions to be identified, understood, challenged, and ultimately dismantled; the ultimate aim to assist in creating better Indigenous-governmental relationships. This paper seeks to provide the reader with some theoretical foundations of a sociology for social justice. Using structures of the Australian Settler-State as the focus of the critique this paper outlines a paradigm of a critical Indigenous research methodology to challenge state practice. It calls for continued critique within the contemporary political arena of the Abbott Coalition Government. The Abbott Government has, in relation to Indigenous politics, continued the exclusionary practices of previous governments. In the fight for social justice, it is incumbent upon us, as sociologists, to take on the Settler-State in the hope that better futures can and will be created.

Sociology and Social Justice: Embodying the Critical Edge

To express one's values as a social science researcher is to lay a claim to the world, to show one's explicit positioning and commitment to a set of positions which will guide study from its very beginning. We cannot avoid creating research that is not 'neutral' or value-free due to our own positioning within the social fabric (Becker 1967:239). The notion that there

is an attainable neutral ground where researchers are impartial spectators creates the danger of a situation whereby "burning questions are left at the door of the laboratory" (Bourdieu 2010:257). Therefore, in making choices about what to study and what to value, sociologists must acknowledge these principles explicitly to provide as much objectivity for readers as possible (Mills 2000:177). The unchecked scholarly point of view whereby researchers impose worldviews upon agents – due to a lack of reflexivity and consciousness regarding research implications – must be continuously rejected (Bourdieu 2010:267). In order to act consciously sociologists should locate themselves within the intellectual landscape via a statement of one's philosophical foundations which ground their research paradigm.

In a world where myriad injustices continue on a daily basis and possibilities for greater social cohesion and democratic reform are on our door step, a sociology which does not seek to promote such futures may reinforce the status quo and positions of the powerful (Graber 2004:100). In acting as "an advisor to the king" (Mills 2000:180) research can be unintentionally used to inform, refine, and ultimately uphold pre-existing bureaucracy and state systems, along with all of its inherent inequality (Fine 1998). Sociological research grounded in the aim of pursuing social justice is required in order to challenge and critique inequitable social structures in hopes of improving those formations. This entails the unambiguous pursuit of equity of resources, belief in fairness, and respect for the diversity of others in the ultimate aim of eradicating continuing forms of oppression (Feagin 2001:5). In order to assist those who are most affected by exclusion, sociologists can embody the resistance needed through their research by challenging those structures in offering viable alternatives via those who are pushed to the margins by oppressive forces (Mills 2000:174). The role of sociologists is one that speaks back to those in power – particularly the state – and informs publics of the broader socially-constructed frameworks of which their lives are embedded. This approach is founded in hope that better social relations can be actively

created, in the ultimate belief that a better society could exist in the present (Graeber 2004: 4,10). This belief in social change is key: without this hope there is discouragement from trying to fix anything at all (Cox 1995:4).

In flipping the privileged position of researcher on its head, sociologists can, and should aim to investigate ruling regimes that foster inequality and challenge their existence, by providing the scientific framework for political action and assisting in expressions of agency in bettering their relationship with the state (Feagin 2001:11; Tuhiwai Smith 2012). By actively rejecting a top-down perspective of the state as 'correct', particularly when policies and practices reproduce inequity and oppression, we express a challenge towards established orders of knowledge, or the "hierarchy of credibility" (Becker 1967:242), promoted and maintained by both state and capitalist understandings of morality and justice. Objectives of social justice demands researchers to build power, knowledge, and resources from outside existing hierarchy by highlighting agency and the capacity for peoples to make social change for the better, in positioning themselves on the side of the democratic public (Feagin 2001:12). In joining the struggle sociologists are in a unique position to use their tools to work with communities and become allies in challenging, resisting, and ultimately changing the continuing oppression experienced within people's lives (Graeber 2004:105; Tuhiwai Smith 2012:199). However, contextualisation of what is being resisted within the surrounding social fabric is required by researchers, the key of which is the Australian Settler-State.

Setting the Scope: the Australian Settler-State

The key power structure with which both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activists and advocates interact, and of which the scope of critical sociological research must focus, is the Australian Settler-State. The state is a human construction of individuals,

institutions, practices, actions, and reactions which control the “legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Weber 1970:78), the legitimacy of which is maintained through exclusive right to use that violence (Giddens 1984:121). State identities are deliberate creations. Histories are constructed and in this lay the foundations of race relations and much of the power dynamics of the nation. The relationship between nationalism and racism is symbiotic: by aiming to achieve what is in the national interest, the state decides who is a part of such a nation, and who is to be excluded. The establishment of an Other is utilised to differentiate this “fictive ethnicity” (Balibar 1991:49). This process of racialisation, whereby perceived biological features of individuals are categorised by the state, creates the existence of racism within the states border, in both day-to-day as well as institutional fashions.

Racialisation is the key component in the construction of Australian nationalism. The Australian state exists as a result of colonisation of land occupied by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; their attempted removal; destruction of customary law; establishment of colonial sovereignty; and their continued exclusion and marginalisation (Ford 2010:198). This style of governance has been labelled the Australian Settler-State (Maddison 2009:24). Structural exclusion is woven into Australia’s social fabric through which all activity is mediated (Kapferer and Morris 2003:81). In the present day the Australian Settler-State assumes Indigenous peoples are “not yet ready for self-government” (McCallum 2011:609) and instead require a form of coercive assimilation to survive in the modern world. This situation has played out recently in the form of various punitive measures to enforce school attendance, employment, and home ownership (Howard-Wagner 2012). The continuing existence of Indigenous peoples challenges the state's self-perception as one which is "just, unified, and sovereign" (Maddison 2011:163) acting as a persistent reminder to white Australia of the brutality of colonialism and its continuing process (Behrendt 2003:14).

Continuing lack of resolve regarding sovereignty and exclusion of Indigenous Australians demands sociologists to employ paradigms informed by, and embedded within, the social justice movement. In response, sociologists can establish a research paradigm to challenge the Australian Settler-State in the present.

Speaking Up To Power Using Sociology

A research paradigm is built upon the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and values which provide a project's framework and basic orientation to methodology (Kovach 2010:41). With foundations in social justice, sociological research is political in both supporting the decolonisation process and self-determination movement of Indigenous peoples (Tuhiwai Smith 2012:120) while also challenging the universality of "normal" social science and resulting worldviews (Coburn, Moreton-Robinson, Sefa Dei and Stewart-Harawira 2013:332). In seeking to challenge conditions perpetuating injustice and keeping people on the margins, research can provide space for peoples to express their narratives of resistance to larger, particularly governmental audiences (Tuhiwai Smith 2012:205). However, the researcher has a duty to situate themselves within this wholly racialised world and not leave authorship as 'invisible' in the research process.

A research paradigm would be ethically invalid without my own location-of-self in the powerful position as researcher from its inception. Without constant reflection upon my own position within the Australian Settler-State framework as a young, white, and tertiary-educated male, I lose the possibility of contesting potential power imbalances within a project. This challenges exploitative aspects of past social science, in seeking to minimise reproduction of "colonial power imbalances" (Martin 2003:203). A critical approach to research in the realm of Indigenous politics must therefore recognise the power dynamic of

the relationship between myself as a white Australian sociologist and the community I am working with (Tuhiwai Smith 2012:178). This requires a conscious rejection of firstly, the Othering of peoples who can clearly speak for themselves (Denzin and Lincoln 2008:5) and secondly, representing people without explicitly critiquing the surrounding power inequities in which parties are immersed (Fine 1998:149).

This position recognises and does not attempt to erase the relationship between Indigenous-coloniser which continues to exist within research (Nicholls 2009:119). Importantly, this relationship takes shape as a continued acknowledgement of difference of social location, both as an active collaboration between white researcher and Indigenous peoples, and a continued mutual dialogue about differences relative to Settler-State practice (Wilson 2008:37). What is required is actively inverting white privilege as best as possible for use in consciously promoting social justice through research via critique of the structures of whiteness and Othering. Non-Indigenous researchers can seek to work *with* Indigenous communities, activist groups, and organisations, in promoting better futures between Settler-State and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Denzin and Lincoln 2008:2-6). In becoming “allied others” in the continuing fight for social justice, non-Indigenous scholars can then utilise a critical epistemology to examine the Settler-State through decolonising, participatory, and collaborative Indigenous methodologies (Chilisa 2012:65; Denzin and Lincoln 2008:6).

Self-Determination and Social Justice: A Critical Indigenous Research Paradigm

As social scientists align themselves with the Indigenous activist project, research agendas have needed to move away from traditional Western methodological frameworks. Sociology then must turn towards the aims, aspirations, and resistance efforts of Indigenous

peoples in a conscious effort to “decolonise the academy” (Tuhiwai Smith 2012:218). The most recent phase of critical Indigenous research post-1990s witnessed challenges to government and the position of Indigenous peoples in Australian society, demanding redress to the continuing impacts of structural racism and exclusion of Indigenous voices from the forefront of research (Wilson 2008:51). The focus of a critical Indigenous research methodology is to challenge the Othering embedded within research practices (Brayboy et al. 2012:434). The primary aim is to use theoretical frameworks to understand inequity and express alternatives created by those who live on the margins of those structures. Decolonisation is a process of making the worldviews of those whom are colonised the focus in order to communicate as a medium of self-determination, back at colonising structures which continue to marginalise (Chilisa 2012:14; Kovach 2010:42).

Social justice in research is realised when research methods seek to give voice to the previously researched Other. Sociological analysis holds a ground-up, strength-based orientation, focusing on stories of resistance and continuing survival within a colonial structure in order to decentre the dominance of the Settler-State (Rigney 1999:116). The notion of ‘researching back’ involves an active rejection of the state’s hierarchy of credibility through a re-examination of historical circumstances which have led to Indigenous peoples being marginalised academically and by governmental structures. This highlights Indigenous people’s voices as alternate viewpoints which act as counterassault to these claims, enabling alternate views of present power-formations to be articulated to a larger audience (Wilson 2008:37). This celebration of survival and resistance – contrasting previous deficit-focused research claiming to witness assimilation and demise – reveals how Indigenous peoples retain their own epistemologies, values, and sense of community in the face of colonialism and continue to talk up to power (Rigney 1999:117; Tuhiwai Smith 2012:146,226). Rather than the non-Indigenous researcher holding all power, this position switches the power to also be

held by Indigenous collaborators (Cross 2008:16). Such strategies aim to create a more equal dialogue between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous peoples through research in partnering to study the various structures which continue to perpetuate inequity (Coburn, Moreton-Robinson, Sefa Dei and Stewart-Harawira 2013:333).

In recognising the unequal context of colonialism, sociologists need to keep reflecting on key principles throughout the methodological process to ensure power inequity is not perpetuated (Cross 2008:43). The researcher must embody the key values of respect, responsibility, relationality, and the notion of reciprocity, with the latter entailing the process of giving back in order for the community to continue to thrive and survive (Brayboy et al. 2012:439). A critical Indigenous research methodology therefore upholds values such as: recognising Indigenous worldviews as vital to survival; the honouring of continuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social mores; an emphasis on the social fabric, and historical/political contexts which shape the positioning of both community and the researcher; and of privileging Indigenous voices throughout the process (Martin 2003:208). In order to be meaningful, projects must take place on the terms and definitions of collaborating Indigenous peoples (Nicholls 2009:119). The focus of such an approach emanates from Indigenous peoples, the gaze then concentrated on institutional frameworks which continue to marginalise and promote implicit whiteness as a regime of hegemonic power (Behrendt 2003:9; Moreton-Robinson 2006:391). Thus, research which embraces collaboration demands that the researcher relinquish some control of the process: as a Non-Indigenous researcher this is commitment to rejecting the inherent colonialism of research in allowing enough flexibility in methods to be localised for maximum benefit of practical outcomes (Nicholls 2009:120; Tuhiwai Smith 2012:51).

A critical Indigenous approach must embody these values and use methods critically for future practical use by Indigenous peoples (Denzin and Lincoln 2008:5; Wilson 2008:39).

Approaches to methods such as Participatory Action Research – engaging community as social and political actors for the creation of emancipatory knowledge – have three key components: a belief in the power of social transformation through collective action; a commitment to highlighting and honouring the experience, worldviews, and knowledge of communities with ethical care; and commitment to reciprocity, sharing the results of research through collaboration in the aim of making positive social change and steps towards self-determination (Kovach 2010; Tuhiwai Smith 2012:130). This form of inquiry values individuals as active agents who are capable of undertaking social action fully involved as collaborators in research design, decision making, and production of outcomes with researchers for transformative results in the aim of social justice (Chilisa 2012:235; Heron and Reason 2011:145).

Such methods highlight the important fact that Indigenous research is embedded within the larger process of ongoing decolonisation and continued resistance. Research which embracing critical Indigenous paradigms seek to challenge structures of marginalisation and exclusion by speaking up to power-holders as embodied by the Australian Settler-State; create further hope for alternate futures by highlighting the possibility of change from the strength of ground-up perspectives and community agency; and provide practical value for Indigenous peoples and their communities. Such a conscious positioning will continue be demanded of sociologists for as long as power inequity and exclusionary practices of colonialism exist.

In Conclusion: Vital Future

At the time of writing, the Abbott Coalition Government is mid-way through its first term and the marginalising approach of the Australian Settler-State very likely to continue.

Statesman-like rhetoric of change to come for the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Settler-State has been swiftly followed by deep economic cuts to multiple Indigenous community organisations in the government's first budget. This process has taken place amongst a vicious political debate regarding the proposed changes to the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, particularly legal protection from racial vilification, exemplifying the continuing presence of whiteness and racism within Settler-State structures. Both are potentially damaging to the social justice process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in twenty-first century Australia. This only goes to further highlight the need for a sociology which works *with* Indigenous peoples to express voices of resistance to those enduring state structures which marginalize and exclude. A continuing promotion of a decolonising paradigm and activist sociology is therefore needed, in seeking to provide practical ways in which individuals highlight the possibilities of hope and change that is required to challenge continued power inequity and unfolding colonialisms. It could not be a more important time for sociologists who work with Indigenous peoples and communities: we have the research tools, a history of fighting for social justice, and a prime position to speak back to power and the Settler-State in the continued effort to change the world around us for the better of many into the future.

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