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David S. Trigger

Excerpt

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CHAPTER ONE

Doomadgee: the politics of colonial social relations

By the time I reached Doomadgee on my first visit in May 1978, I had recorded conflicting fragments of folk knowledge about the place and its people. In Mt Isa, one view described the Aboriginal residents of Doomadgee as largely 'having no minds of their own', as 'like children to a father', the father figure being the long-serving manager of the settlement. This perspective was put to me by a White lawyer who had worked with the Aboriginal Legal Service, by several Aboriginal people who were not from Doomadgee, and by an Aboriginal man who had left there some years previously. The general feeling among these people was that Doomadgee Aborigines lacked a full awareness of their own oppression, and that both political motivation and sophistication were lacking in their response to their circumstances.

Yet I was also informed by the representative member of the National Aboriginal Conference (a now defunct commonwealth government advisory organisation) that there was some interest in 'land rights' at Doomadgee, and in teaching 'culture' to the children. Several Aboriginal people in Mt Isa told me that some of the older Doomadgee residents were very knowledgeable about the history of a wide region, including the settlement. One woman of Aboriginal/European descent asked me to find out from certain old people what I could of her mother's mother's connections to kin and country. Her grandmother had looked after her on a mainland cattle station until 1929, when as a child of nine years she was taken by the authorities, with her siblings, to Mornington Island. This woman regarded certain of the older residents at Doomadgee as custodians of valuable historical information about her family. Another Aboriginal man, who was originally from Mornington Island, explained that many people at Doomadgee had much knowledge of the country;

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his work as a government ranger involved recording archaeological sites in the Doomadgee area. These views countered the image of Doomadgee people as childlike inmates of an authoritarian institution.

I had also gleaned some information about the place from an earlier interview with a recently retired long-serving member of the Doomadgee staff. She had talked mostly about routine aspects of the administration. Although she indicated that some of the old men knew 'stories' relevant to 'initiation', she stressed that Doomadgee Aborigines wished to forget about 'spirit worship and devil worship' practices. Yet, by her own account, the strength of their alleged convictions in this respect remained unclear, for she made the point that anthropologists were dangerous because their questions stirred up the old people's thoughts about the 'old ways', and thereby made them sad. Another (younger) staff member, who had spent only a comparatively short time at Doomadgee, had complained of authoritarianism on the part of senior members of the administration, and (although she eventually changed her mind) she said in early 1978 that she would not return to work 'under the present administration'. Hence, on my first visit, I did not expect uniformity of views among the non-Aboriginal staff.

Little research had been done at Doomadgee. One researcher carried out substantial linguistic fieldwork there in 1970, mostly consisting of intensive work with a few of the remaining fluent speakers of one of the Aboriginal languages spoken in the settlement. In her view the mission 'stepped on the people very hard and [beat] out a lot of their spirit and self-respect . . . it's preposterous what's happened in the past' (S. Keen, personal communication 4/4/1978). Another colleague, who had spent a brief period conducting anthropological research at Doomadgee in the early 1970s, also mentioned the authoritarian nature of the administration, although he was not prepared to elaborate and thereby disclose what he regarded as information obtained in confidence. Nor was he inclined to portray the Brethren Mission administration solely in negative terms (M. Calley, personal communication 1978).

Thus, my expectations on entering Doomadgee were of a relatively isolated and socially closed authoritarian mission settlement. In addition to my broad concern to understand the nature of social life there, I was employed to research Aboriginal relationships to land, and to document 'sites of significance' in terms of Aboriginal traditions. How much 'traditional' knowledge would be held, perhaps having survived zealous missionary opposition over decades? Was the idea of serious research on traditional knowledge of the landscape really as futile as had been implied by a young (non-Aboriginal) DAIA clerk in Mt Isa, who sarcastically identified one of the centrally

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located bars in town (the 'Snake Pit' in local parlance), as an 'Aboriginal site'?

My first encounters with Doomadgee people, in Mt Isa and on the drive northwards, had provided little evidence to counter this young man's portrayal of Aborigines in the region as hopeless drunks. I met drunk people from Doomadgee at the Gregory Downs and Burketown hotels. And as I finally slowed the vehicle to a stop at the crossing of the Nicholson River just east of the settlement, a very inebriated middle-aged man climbed up on to the running board and tried to hold a disjointed conversation, while attempting to focus his gaze on my face by peering in the open side window. After a short time, aware that I was trying to drive off, one of the women with him (also very drunk) sought to persuade him to get down, using vigorous verbal abuse. When words failed she punched him, and I drove off leaving the pair struggling by the side of the road. The approving reports several individuals had given me about Doomadgee being something of a Christian haven away from the damage caused by over-consumption of alcohol had apparently portrayed only part of the reality.

In hindsight, my first period of fieldwork (six and a half weeks) was full of extremely intensive experiences, during which the question with which this volume is primarily concerned gradually coalesced in my mind. Field notes and diary entries indicate my constant awareness of the politics of social life. Things were far from completely serene, stable or cooperative. Public drunkenness like that I had encountered at the river crossing on the first day, with its associated loud verbal abuse, violence and intervention by the local Aboriginal police, was one of the obvious indicators of a lack of social harmony. It also indicated a conflict over definitions of appropriate public behaviour. Like the routine gambling activities held 'down the river', public drunkenness contradicted local views (held by some Aboriginal residents, as well as all non-Aboriginal staff) about acceptable Christian behaviour. And this was just one aspect of a broadly contested, complex series of views apparently held about how people should behave and what they should think. From the very early stages of my fieldwork, the prevailing social order appeared to be the result of a pragmatic consensus that was routinely contested in social action, though certainly not always as openly as in the case of public drunkenness.

As I experienced settlement life, I became aware of a complex interplay between different aspects of social action among Aboriginal residents, which appeared variously to constitute both accommodation and resistance to the wider society within which they were encapsulated. In one sense, their situation was clear. Aborigines' material circumstances were much poorer than all but the most

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destitute of non-Aboriginal Australians. Their residences were inferior to those of the White staff, who lived in a separate part of the settlement, where essential services such as the store, school and hospital were also located. The routine material conditions of physical existence indicated an entrenched Aboriginal passive dependency on the remote industrial economy of modern Australia. For while there were some hunting, fishing and gathering activities, mostly on weekends, Aboriginal residents were clearly dependent on the regular arrival of essential food commodities which were purchased from the store. Many were also dependent on social security benefits for the means to purchase these commodities.

Moreover, people were not seeking to purchase only essential goods. In some respects there was an evident accommodation to a broadly commodity-centred lifestyle. Some non-essential goods were highly desired. My diary records that one of my strongest impressions at the end of the first day was that many motor vehicles (some very dilapidated) were regularly and speedily driven around the settlement by young men; and it did not take long to realise just how widespread was the desire for access to a vehicle. Indeed, I soon learned that even the children's play incorporated the 'motor car' as an important focus of settlement life. They used wire and old tin cans to make what they called 'tin trucks', and spent much time vigorously pushing these around in the red dust, emulating the sounds of roaring engines and changing gears as they changed direction and speed.

However, if there was accommodation to a commodity-centred lifestyle, people were not complacent about their capacity to obtain desired items. There were complaints about what Aboriginal residents saw as their material poverty, especially in comparison to the perceived material wealth of the local White staff. A particularly forceful complaint concerned the lack of hot water facilities in the Aboriginal houses, in contrast to the staff homes. The most common expression of dissatisfaction was that the settlement store would not sell tobacco (because of the religious convictions of the local mission staff). On most days I would hear people saying 'we bugged for smoke', as they commented on their lack of tobacco and sought to borrow the makings for a cigarette. Other complaint was directed against White governmental authorities; indeed, the most bitterly contentious issue concerning material interests was that Aboriginal employees on the settlement were not paid award wages.

However, not all Aboriginal residents were entirely sympathetic to these sentiments of complaint. The Christians largely supported the mission decision not to sell tobacco. And while all of those who held jobs thought they should receive award wages, some employed Aboriginal people spoke disdainfully of others' lack of commitment to a regular working lifestyle. In the words of an Aboriginal policeman

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at that time, and his wife: 'The people can get jobs if they try'. Some of the older people were more likely to complain about the behaviour of the 'young generation' than about whether they had hot water taps, a refrigerator or a washing machine; and many were more likely to express affection for various White staff, and gratitude for the way they had been 'looked after' by the mission over the years, than to complain about the wage rates of Aboriginal workers. In fact, old men who had worked for long periods in the pastoral industry regarded most young people as comparatively poor workers; the young men were said to be 'always chasin grog' or 'thinkin about that dress [i.e. young women]'. The Aboriginal population was certainly not united in an articulated opposition to the local missionary administration or the broader Australian society.

My enquiries concerning the complexities of settlement politics soon became focused on the issue of 'culture', for not only did both Aboriginal and White residents learn quickly of my interest in this subject, but also, I found that this had been a contentious public issue for some time prior to my arrival. About two weeks earlier, the school had begun a 'culture program', to teach what both Aborigines and Whites were calling 'culture' to the children. A small number of residents had successfully sought funding from the Aboriginal Arts Board (a commonwealth government agency) to form what they termed a 'culture company'. At least, the idea of a 'company' had apparently arisen because only a legally incorporated organisation could receive the available funds and make sure that control over this money remained in the hands of the group of Aboriginal people who had held the initial discussions with the Arts Board. I was informed that this was a stated objective of both the Aboriginal group and the Arts Board itself. However, the White teachers had instead instituted a 'culture committee', which was expected to advise the school staff about what should be taught. The committee was made up of the older Aboriginal residents who were employed casually to teach 'culture' in school hours. The school principal reported that he had pointed out (to the Arts Board, as well as to the members of the proposed 'culture company') that without assistance from White bookkeepers, the company would be unable to organise such administrative procedures as the purchase of equipment and payment of wages. He thereby implied that such assistance would not be forthcoming for a legally incorporated Aboriginal body that was to be formally independent, not only of the school administrative structure, but of the Aboriginal council as well.

Other missionary staff appeared unhappy with any kind of 'culture program', whether controlled by the teachers or not. While the school principal said that his aim was to show the children that their

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people once had a viable Aboriginal culture, some of the non-teaching staff asserted that it was not possible to separate the acceptable aspects of 'culture' from the many parts that are unacceptable from a Christian Brethren viewpoint. The principal's claim that 'sinister' beliefs and practices would be excluded from the 'culture syllabus' was rejected as naive by some of the non-teaching staff. It was said that there was no 'scriptural authority' for the 'separation' of cultures which was implicit in such teaching of Aboriginal 'culture'; e.g. the manager's wife stated that: 'We'll all be together in heaven so why separate now?'. The manager felt that the 'culture program' would lead to 'racism', presumably because it would emphasise differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Furthermore, his view was that the 'old ways' were gone, and the strength of his belief was made clear to me on my first day at the settlement, when four Aboriginal councillors met me in the manager's office to discuss my plans to carry out research at Doomadgee. In response to my statement of interest in traditional culture and knowledge of country, the manager incredulously posed a question-statement to the council chairman: 'You didn't have any of that culture, did you [X]?'. He thereby elicited agreement from the chairman with this proposition, and with the fact that 'Aboriginal culture' was now simply part of 'history', though I noted that the other councillors appeared non-committal about this point.

It was soon clear that Aboriginal opinion on these issues varied. For example, the 'culture teachers' seemed happy enough with the school 'culture program', though there was complaint that the wages were not high enough, and that the children were 'too stupid' to learn; several people described the pupils as 'lost, poor things' and 'spoiled by White man'. Some older residents expressed the view that not only should 'culture' be taught to the children, but also that 'Blackfella law' should be revived and boys should once again be initiated at Doomadgee. I learned that for many years only a small number of youths with ties to kin and country to the west had continued to be sent to Borroloola to be initiated. The viewpoint arguing for re-establishment of initiation ceremonies at Doomadgee was opposed quite vehemently by a committed Christian Aboriginal minority, as well as by all the White staff. Indeed, in June 1978, a group of Christian Aboriginal councillors notified those planning an initiation ceremony that they were not allowed to hold such activities anywhere on the Doomadgee Reserve. This occurred the morning after a 'practice' session of dancing and singing had been held in preparation for the planned ceremony. On that morning, the councillors met with the manager and, after communicating their decision to the main 'law man' organising the ceremony, came to my camp to warn me not to 'encourage' people in these activities. Among

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their arguments were the propositions that the majority of Aboriginal residents did not want such ceremonies to occur at Doomadgee, that the ceremonies were based on fear, and that people were typically coerced into participating.

This event, which occurred just prior to the end of my first fieldwork period, highlighted the problem of accommodation and resistance in Aboriginal social action. The struggle over definitions of appropriate worldview and associated practices appeared to be a fundamental aspect of settlement life. Certain staff and Aboriginal people held formal offices that allowed them to wield legally sanctioned power. Moreover, the brief accounts of the settlement's history I had obtained indicated that the threat and employment of coercive force had played a critical role in reproducing the historical domination of Aboriginal society. Several people had pointed out the heavy mesh covering the windows in the old boys' dormitory building where, it was said, the inmates were once locked up every night. Yet Aboriginal compliance in 1978 could not be characterised solely in terms of a passive response to the formal state-sponsored power of the staff. There were ways in which some Aboriginal people appeared actively to attribute legitimacy to various features of the system of power relations in which they were enmeshed. It was not so much that certain individuals supported the missionary administration or Queensland government policies in any complete fashion; rather, a wide range of Aboriginal residents expressed, in both their reflective and unelicited discourse, an ambiguous agreement with key aspects of White ideology. Some tenets of Christianity were central to this ideology, with even individuals who stated commitment to 'Blackfella law' also expressing belief in aspects of Christian doctrine. Other ideas that were apparently selectively embraced by a small number of people concerned acceptance of a commodity-centred and employment-centred set of economic aspirations, and of the necessity for continued non-Aboriginal tutelage, if not control, in the administration of the settlement.

On the other hand, actual social relations between Aboriginal and White residents were typically strained, with little apparent intimacy and a great deal of evident social distance. In their everyday domestic life, Aboriginal people largely withdrew from close relationships with White staff. It was soon clear to me that this social separation was a very routine aspect of settlement life, and not something that either Aborigines or Whites commonly remarked upon in unelicited discourse. However, this fundamental social distance prompted an important theoretical question. Might it not be regarded analytically as a form of Aboriginal resistance against administrative intrusiveness, even though it did not evoke clear statements of moral disapproval as did such activities as public drunkenness, gambling

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and attempts at carrying out traditional ritual practices?

Following an initial, intense period of fieldwork, the complex question of understanding the processes of coercion, resistance and accommodation in settlement power relations became a major focus of my research at Doomadgee. The early characterisations I had encountered, of Aboriginal residents as completely powerless and compliant, had proved to be simplistic and naive. Nevertheless, the issue of ideological incorporation of Aboriginal thinking was to become an important area of investigation. The study of social life at Doomadgee thus led me to consider theories of power relations which encompass the nature of both structural and ideological constraints on subordinate individuals and groups.

The problem of coercion and consent

Central to this problem has been the long-debated relationship between voluntarism and determinism. In discussing the concept of power, Lukes (1977: 3) presents this issue in its most general and simple form: to what extent and in what ways are social actors constrained to think and act in the ways they do? The 'voluntarist' or 'anti-structural' view is that the constraints facing choice-making agents are minimal, always external to the agent, and centred upon action as opposed to thought or desire (p. 15). The opposing 'structuralist' (and, as Lukes presents it, Marxist) position emphasises the way structural constraints determine individuals' actions and thoughts. In its most extreme version, this view maintains that the subjectivity or agency of individuals is not the critical factor in explaining social life; what is critical is the way in which individuals are the effects, or 'bearers' of an ensemble of structures (pp. 15–8). With Lukes (p. 29), we can reject both these extreme positions, and recognise that:

social life can only properly be understood as a dialectic of power and structure, a web of possibilities for agents, whose nature is both active and structured, to make choices and pursue strategies within given limits, which in consequence expand and contract over time.

However, the problem remains of understanding how this dialectic operates between structural constraint and individual capacity for social action.

The Weberian tradition provides a partial answer. Weber deals with 'the authoritarian power of command', by which 'the manifested will' of 'the rulers' influences the conduct of 'the ruled' (Weber 1968 III: 946). Thus domination by virtue of structural authority results in obedience to those whose bureaucratic office or social position requires it. Such powers of command typically exist 'by virtue of law' and are implemented through an administrative apparatus (Weber

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1968 III: 948). The importance of structural authority, imposed by state law and consequent administrative practices, operating as a coercive force in the lives of such colonised peoples as Aborigines at Doomadgee, was clear from my earliest fieldwork. Also apposite is Weber's conceptualisation of those aspects of domination that are maintained through 'economic power'. For in the context of the colonisation process, Aboriginal people develop a 'constellation of [material] interests' (Weber 1968 III: 941ff), which typically engenders their dependency on highly regulated access to commodities.

Yet the Weberian discussion of domination does not provide an adequate sociology of compliance. Weber stresses that subordinate people attribute legitimacy to the system of authority relations within which they are situated (1968 III: 952–54). He assumes that people in a position of power or advantage need to justify the legitimacy of their dominance, and hence he gives most attention to the justificatory claims emanating from those 'on high' (Parkin 1982: 77–8). But the question of bestowal of legitimacy 'from below' is not treated fully. Indeed Parkin (1982: 74) describes the Weberian view as being that obedience is given willingly through a positive commitment on the part of the subordinate to the authority they obey. To be fair, if Weber is to be interpreted as stressing voluntarism among the subordinate, his writings also indicate the view that voluntary compliance is derived from people having an 'interest' in obedience that may stem from 'the most diverse motives': '... all the way from simple habituation to the most purely rational calculation of advantage' (1968 I: 212). Nevertheless, Parkin's (1982: 76) complaint must be considered seriously:

Weber makes no distinction between normative compliance that springs from voluntary commitment and that which is grounded in a long term strategy for survival. The questions raised by Marx and his followers concerning the relationship between coercion and compliance are closed off by Weber's approach to the matter. This approach has no place for notions like 'hegemony'.

The concept of hegemony returns us to Lukes' point about the importance of recognising constraints that can structure individuals' thoughts and desires as well as their abilities to carry out actions. Certain Marxist writings, influenced by Gramsci's notion of hegemony, lead us away from considering power relations solely in terms of legally-based structural authority and market-based economic power. Gramsci drew attention to the aspects of class rule in capitalist society that are non-coercive, in that they rest on consent engendered from subordinate groups (Hall *et al* 1977: 51). This occurs within 'civil society': the realm of day-to-day life experience, of moral values and customs, which is analytically separable from both the economic

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structure and the state, while being constrained by both economic and political structures. As Hoffman (1984) has put it, the 'Gramscian challenge' to structural Marxism has been to redress its emphasis on the coercive nature of politics, by seeking adequate analysis of the problem of consent.

In much writing on this subject, to discuss 'consent' is to focus on the extent to which subordinate consciousness is constrained by dominant ideology. In a major critique of the 'dominant ideology thesis' (Abercrombie *et al* 1980: 29), this notion is presented as over-emphasising the causal efficacy of influential ideas (or the 'super-structure') and under-emphasising the role of economic constraint in the maintenance of power relations. Thus, by this view, we should be careful in a study of colonial social relations not to over-emphasise the constraints on Aboriginal thinking that derive from key ideas imposed by the colonisers. At least, we should not stress this aspect of colonialism without addressing sufficiently the role of economic power.

Nevertheless, contrary to what has been suggested (Abercrombie *et al* 1980: 8), the importance of dominant ideology can be recognised without implying that there can be no resilient subordinate culture, or that the intellectual universe of subordinate groups becomes identical to that of ruling groups. As Rootes (1981: 440) has argued, this attack on the concept of dominant ideology has been too fixed on the notion of ideology as a systematic and coherently articulated body of ideas. He suggests (p. 440) that another level of ideology is 'directly relevant to practice, directly influenced by experience, and unreflectively uttered as "common-sense" '.

Indeed, the concept of hegemony has been developed in certain Marxist writings beyond the notion of dominant ideology as simply an imposed set of ideas. Consider Williams' discussion of the concept's relevance for literary analysis: 'What is decisive is not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs, but the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values' (Williams 1977: 109). Williams' concept of hegemony stresses processes of 'lived' dominance and subordination whereby, apart from the formally coercive power of economic and political structures, it is broader cultural meanings and values that powerfully constrain individuals' thinking and behaviour.

Fine-grained study of the 'cultural' life of small populations, including ethnographic description and analysis of emic meanings expressed as 'common sense', has long been the hallmark of anthropology. In recent theorising there has been a noticeable focus on the importance of routine 'practices' for the understanding of relations of domination. In her overview of anthropological theory during