
BOOK REVIEW

Deirdre Howard-Wagner, Maria Bargh and Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez (eds)

The Neoliberal State, Recognition And Indigenous Rights: New Paternalism To New Imaginings

ANU Press, Canberra, 2018, 352pp., \$53, paperback.

Reviewed by Amy Thunig

The Neoliberal State, Recognition, and Indigenous Rights: New Paternalism to New Imaginings offers a considered, insightful collection of essays and interpretative micro-studies which analyse and discuss ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ and the ways in which this manifests, impacting Indigenous lives, communities, and agency. Edited by Deirdre Howard-Wagner, Maria Bargh, and Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez, who collectively crafted the introduction, this is a text which will find application and relevance across various fields due to the insight and poignant commentaries made on the intersectional nature of Indigenous rights and recognition and the state in the neoliberal age within Australia, Canada, and Aotearoa/New Zealand. With sixteen contributors, some of whom identify as First Peoples, this text cumulatively represents a diverse range of experiences, expertise, and understandings resulting in a collection which provides a mix of provocative, innovative, and practical considerations. Discussions and analyses of the manifestations of neoliberalism within various contexts, as well as the constraining and enabling aspects of neoliberal governance specifically in the context of Indigenous peoples, is an identified objective of this edited collection, and in this way it is positioned as the first collection of its kind.

Approaching this text from the perspective of someone who, whilst engaged in the politics of living, researching, and teaching as an Indigenous woman has not engaged formally in political theory, the use of sector-specific jargon at first lent this reader to perceive the text as heavy reading. However, the guiding structure of this collection, including the locating of each contributor, the discerning introduction,

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and the grouping of essays into three distinct themes make for an insightful and valuable read even for a political novice. The editors outline that contributors were invited to 'share innovative, practical and provocative ideas with respect to Indigenous rights, recognition, and the state in the neoliberal age' (p. xxi) and, in this way, this text delivers. Refreshing in its move away from deficit language, this assemblage examines and critiques the structures in which indigeneity, identity, rights, and the complexities of economics and politics within colonisation impact the day-to-day experiences and opportunities of First Peoples. With special mention to the contributions by Alexander Paige and Shelley Bielefeld, 'The Neoliberal State, Recognition, and Indigenous Rights' adds to the growing body of scholarship which discusses the racialised effects of neoliberalism, particularly in the context of Indigenous peoples, rights, and aspects of life such as consumerism and the privatisation of social welfare. In this way it lends observation and application to intersecting fields such as education, health, and any sector where settler relations and the state impact on First Peoples experiences and outcomes – which is arguably every sector in colonised lands such as Australia, Canada, and Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Whilst these critiques and discussions demonstrate the ways in which neoliberalism enacts a new form of paternalism, and is problematic for various Indigenous communities and organisations, it is important to note that as the title indicates the focus of this text is not only on paternalism, but also on new imaginings. And the writers and editors have collectively delivered on both. Arguments are made that while dispossession occurs through the market, it also provides a mechanism for achieving self-determination in the neoliberal age. Many of the authors illustrate how Indigenous economic development and enterprise offers greater access to self-determination, changing the relationship Indigenous peoples have with the state. Such considerations are important in Australia's current political climate. For readers who are seeking insight into possibilities and experiences within the continent now known as Australia, chapter 5 'Expressions of Indigenous Rights and Self-Determination from the Ground Up: A Yawuru Example' by Mandy Yap and Eunice Yu is of considerable value in its examination of self-determination, well-being, policy and neoliberalism. Howard-Wagner, Bargh and Altamirano-Jiménez's co-authored chapter highlights various ways in which Indigenous rights in Australia have been wound back, commencing with then Prime Minister John Howard in 1996, and resulting in a 'complex

hybridisation of neoliberal strategies that today target every dimension of Aboriginal life, from social security, to school attendance, to the way Aboriginal organisations do business' (p. 14). This further highlights the relationship between neoliberalism, self-determination and lived experience of First Peoples in Australia. Emerging as a central theme, poverty (and poverty governance) is argued to be a manifestation of an overtly racial project driven and enforced through paternalistic governance which drives disadvantage. As a researcher who is particularly engaged in the intersectional experiences of female academics who identify as First Peoples, chapter 2 'Privatisation and dispossession in the name of indigenous women's rights,' written by Zapotec woman Isabel Altamiro-Jiménez, provided much food for thought.

Living in the New South Wales region of Newcastle myself, Deidre Howard-Wagner's exploration of the relational and practical effects of neoliberalism within the city of Newcastle was significant in highlighting 'actually existing neoliberalism' within my own communities. While revealing many difficulties with mainstreaming and a one-size-fits-all approach, Howard-Wagner discusses the ways in which struggles for autonomy and self-determination among urban Aboriginal organisations within this region have long been a journey. Progress has been sought through external partnerships and associations and/or flexible and innovative entrepreneurial solutions, Indigenous-driven economic development, external associations, and partnerships.

Collectively, 'The Neoliberal State, Recognition and Indigenous rights: New Paternalism to New Imaginings' brings to the fore a wide range of examples which demonstrate the ways in which the state, positioned as the grantor of rights – as well as its privileging of certain forms of knowledge, legal traditions, cartographic representations, and language – impacts upon Indigenous people. This impact reaches to First People community, lands, and resources to the extent that the state manifests its power by determining not only who qualifies for rights, but how identity and indigeneity is defined and applied, and how and what is measured in state policies, goals, and projects of 'improvement.'

While each empirically-grounded, interpretative micro-study provides a value of its own, it is as a whole and with the inclusion of the introduction that this text shines, providing a broadening of the debate and analysis of contemporary government policy, moving from a broad

focus on land rights and resource development, to focus on the complex and specific matters of social policy, disability policy, and more. This is a distinctive and welcome collection with global value, application and consideration for various fields.

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