

THE CONVERSATION

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What residents of an English mining town learned from visiting Aboriginal communities

June 12, 2015 12.02pm BST



The legacy of dispossession continues to this day. Author provided

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For the past two years, two apparently unconnected groups have been working together to develop cultural resources to help deal with difficult socio-economic circumstances.

The groups, from Ashington, Northumberland, and various Aboriginal communities around Brisbane, Australia, have very different histories, traditions and environments, separated as they are by thousands of miles and years of human history.

Members of the Ashington group have visited their Aboriginal counterparts for a month-long exchange, during which they shadowed their hosts, examined their circumstances and engaged in a discussion about advancing collective interests.

The biggest challenge in dealing with this particular cross-cultural context has been to navigate the fraught consequences of engagement between European and Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people have, for two and a half centuries, faced dispossession, extermination, exploitation, alienation, inequality and domination. Throughout, settlers have extracted great, but uneven, wealth from their resources, territories and labour. With the extraction of natural resources continuing apace, another pernicious form of extraction is expanding – in this case, with regard to culture and spirituality.



Ashington residents on their recent Australian trip. Author provided

Fighting stereotypes

For some, the common image of Aboriginal people is not a simple misconception. It is a visceral desire for the “noble savage”. In secular, industrial societies such as England, some people feel that the more we move away from proximity to the land, from traditional stability and from the spiritual world, the more those goods appeal. We latch onto those whom we perceive to be our opposites – no matter how erroneous our perception or crazy the consequence.

As Renato Rosaldo once put it, this is an expression of imperialist nostalgia:

'We' (who believe in progress) valorise innovation, and then yearn for more stable worlds, whether these reside in our own past, in other cultures or in the conflation of the two ... When the so-called civilising process destabilises forms of life, the agents of change experience transformations of other cultures as if they were personal losses.

Aboriginal Australians, as well as Indigenous people across the globe, appear to offer some of us hope of a more peaceful and stable life. If they have sustained their “noble savagery”, then we may either follow them or regard them as totems of salvation to appeal to when the guilt of colonialism becomes too much.

We regard their use of TVs, cars, air conditioning units and other modern conveniences as either temporary errors to be dispensed with when they are allowed to return to the bush or illustrations of The Fall – people perverted by tasting the forbidden fruit of technology. In contrast to the competing, developmentalist trend of pushing technology on Indigenous people, some of us want to rip these goods from their hands so that they might avoid further “perversion” and we further guilt.

In terms of the historical extraction of goods from Indigenous peoples, the search for salvation from modernity may appear fairly benign. It does not require transfers, violent or otherwise, of land or

material resources. However, it does entail patronising people and reducing their autonomy in consequence. No longer are Aboriginal people human beings with varied and distinct relationships with the world; they are mere subjects who exist to fulfil the need to reduce feelings of guilt. Any departure from the natural state which allows us to sustain hope of salvation fills some with further sadness, guilt and disappointment.

The corollary of patronising groups is that we lower expectations of their abilities in the modern world. We thereby disrespect them and fail to examine their ideas seriously. The problem is that dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is so fraught by the consequences of privileged settlers living on Aboriginal land that egalitarian exchange may feel impossible.

As Morgan Brigg, Senior Lecturer in Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Queensland states:

Romanticism can be as bad as outright racism. I'm reluctant to criticise alternative approaches and methods, since these help to challenge the dominance of European knowledge and the colonial legacy in the academy, but uncritical fawning does not benefit anyone.

Quite how people are expected to recover and gain strength by being reduced collectively to the status of imaginative children is not clear.

Cultural exchange

A similarly challenging misconception affects some Aboriginal people too. We have found that just as Aboriginal people, who historically constituted many different peoples across the continent, are seen wrongly as homogenous, some Aboriginal people view white people as fairly homogenous and English people as a single, advantaged nation that, being responsible for colonialism, live lives of plenty.

If members of the Australian group visiting the UK are expecting suit-wearing, cut-glass accented aristocrats plush with wealth from dealings in India, then they will seriously be confounded when they land in Ashington.

The project offers the possibility for new forms of dialogue by virtue of the sheer moral, historical and geographical distance between the groups, the shared experience of (very different forms of) struggle and the everyday confrontation with human beings incorporated, albeit temporarily, into alien communities.

If genuine, constructive developments are to occur, they have to be achieved through relationships guided ethically by concern for equality, solidarity and non-domination. While sensitivity may be a means of upholding those values, we should not mistake sensitivity for fawning. That can be a compounding sign of inequality, a deficit in solidarity and a form of domination.

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