

The politics of recognition

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When Charles Taylor wrote about the importance of seeing oneself reflected in the images that build a sense of identity, both internally and in the eyes of the onlooker (1997, pp. 25-26), he was writing about something that anybody could see the necessity of. I do not pretend to be able to understand the mosaic of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences, but the patterns of erasure and stereotype that underpin systemic cultural oppression are echoed whenever marginalisation is something people try to maintain; for example, Taylor writes about feminist theorists with this idea of recognition and internalised oppression (1997, p. 25). The fact that anyone can then look at the prospect of constitutional recognition and feel ambivalent at the very least is genuinely upsetting to me.

The main theory running through propositions for constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians is the elimination of race as a construct from the constitution that defines how our nation is governed. The inclusion of Aboriginal Australians on the basis of race as of the 1967 referendum created a change, but there is a great underlying racialisation in the way citizens are spoken of in the constitution (Pearson 2014, pp. 52-53). Until familiarising myself with these propositions, I wasn't aware there was a clause in our constitution allowing for the government to make laws on the basis of race, which borders on disturbing to me – though it allowed, in 1967, for the breakdown of some of the population barriers, it also opens up some alarming possibilities for the overactive imagination. Instead of this method of “inclusion” of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the push is for genuine constitutional acknowledgement of the indigenous population of Australia prior to its “discovery”.

This comes back to this idea of representation, of recognition. The Australian constitution might not be as omnipresent as television or popular music, but to see reflections of oneself creates comfort and familiarity. It is constantly eroded by all of the negative stereotypes and reinforcement of existing power structures, but the constitution begins to build towards how and what we learn, how and what we depict, how and what we know. I can't help but think that the apathy largely blamed for resistance towards constitutional change is a veil over internalised – or, in many cases, just straight out there – racism. There are other arguments – Mark McMillan argues, quite interestingly, about this being a case of undermining federalism, and with a far more legislative eye than I can use (2016). Still: how many of the people claiming constitutional change is too much work would say the same thing if a more “acceptably different” group were pushing to have race removed from the



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constitution? How many of them somehow think that this is going to open a door to other minority groups clamouring for change, and are uncomfortable with any upset in a hierarchy that might affect their position? I would like to be more optimistic, but I would have to guess a lot.

References

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