INTERPRETATIONS OF BLACK HISTORY

by Gary Nichollons

D.J. Mulvaney's extensively revised and profusely illustrated basic text of the history of Black Australia prior to the European invasion will undoubtedly become a central reference in studies of Australian archaeology, anthropology and history. It will be used by people as diverse as Black activists, trade-union activists, university students and crusty old professors. As well as these people, whose main aim will be the extraction of key descriptive details it will also be important, at a number of levels, for Marxists. Yet like all the products of bourgeois social science it needs to be situated in an economic and socio-political context in order to allow some clarification of the nature of the ideological distortion and mystification involved.

Though trained as a prehistorian I do not wish to go into the technical arguments that may well keep others employed for many years to come. I wish instead to concentrate on the general issues and interpretations of Black history alluded to and the economic and socio-political bases of the discipline. As readers will no doubt be aware from articles in publications such as The Australian (Williams, 1975) and Current Affairs Bulletin (Dickson, 1975) there has been a remarkable spate of discoveries of ancient material (bones, tools, food-scrap etc.) over the past five to ten years. In addition, as Mulvaney points out, there have been a large number of changes in theories about this sort of material over the same period. All Australian prehistorians would see both of these developments as significant. What is much more difficult for them to accept is that such factors as rising Black militancy are equally crucial in such developments and that the awareness of the destruction of Black society forms the real basis of the discipline.

Not unrelated to these 'practical' aspects is the failure of Australian prehistorians to confront the total historical significance of the forms of pre-class society they are studying. Mulvaney talks of the significance of the forms of these studies "in terms of Australian self-knowledge" (p.14) without specifying the major class differences. For the bourgeoisie and their allies (both Black and White) this knowledge may be conceived in terms of aesthetic, religious, antiquarian, or vague humanist interests. For Marxists, involved in the struggles of the working class, this knowledge is more likely to be seen in terms of the dynamic relation between the economic base of the mode of production and social organisation. In line with these differing interests the bourgeoisie and their allies have a clear stake in separating Black Australians from any historical materialist understanding of their past mainly to prevent any practical political lessons being drawn from these types of study.

This is not to say that all the results of bourgeois studies such as are incorporated in this book are to be disregarded, nor that a
knowledge of the dynamics and historical tendency of pre-class society in Australia 30,000 years ago immediately and simply gives rise to timely political demands. Rather it is a challenge to systematically reconstruct these studies so that the method used is one that generates practical political lessons which can be made available to the working class and its Black and White allies.

II

If the 1930's can be said to represent the first decade of intensive studies of living Blacks by professional anthropologists then the 1960's clearly represent the same sort of development in studies of the material remains of former Black communities. Institutionally this can be seen in W.C. Wentworth's suggestion (1959) and the establishment (1961) of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS) by the Federal Liberal government and the establishment of prehistory courses in some universities at the same time. Probably the only clear articulation of the reasons for the massive increase in public expenditure evidenced by these developments is Wentworth's original submission.

His arguments are solely based on the view that "from an academic viewpoint, these people are among the most interesting primitive races in the world" (1959,2) and the fact that "under the forces of mining exploitation, pastoral expansion and civilizing influences the remnant (even in the north - GPN) is being rapidly eroded away". Very similar arguments were used in the 1920's in the case for the establishment of a chair in anthropology at Sydney University though the realisation of the level of destruction that had already occurred was not as obvious. The 1959 realisation was that, with only minor exceptions, Black society had been destroyed. Wentworth's response was to call for urgent study of not only the remnants but of prehistory. Another response also accepted by the conservative political parties was what resulted in the 1967 referendum. This campaign largely became a public expression of the guilt that the realisation of the destruction engendered in Whites.

At this same time big campaigns on Black equality were being conducted (especially in the north)\(^*\) and much of the tone of the conservative arguments clearly have this as an undercurrent. For example Wentworth concludes his 1959 paper with the claim that one "incidental advantage" of these studies would be that "we may handle the problems of the assimilation of our aborigines a little better if we know more about their native background" (1959,9). I believe that this is exactly what the bourgeoisie have done over the last 16 years - but more on that after an examination of the contents of Mulvaney's book. It should be noted that Mulvaney himself sees only the surface manifestations of all of this viz., "a revival by Aborigines of concern for their traditional lifestyle" (p.71) and again with respect to Black protest at the activities of physical anthropologists (p.198).

III

I intend to go through the book seriatim even though I realise that the organisation of the book is very clumsy and haphazard. I suspect this is largely a result of the lack of any overall theory guiding what is largely an empirical sourcebook.

Mulvaney's use of the scholastic divisions 'history', 'protohistory', and 'prehistory' confuses the essential nature of historical development in Australia and this is nowhere clearer than in his chapter on "Protohistory". By this term he means the period of time between the first Black contact with members of class societies and the era of European colonization. After some excellent discussion of the evidence for regular (though sporadic) contact with Macassans exploiting beche-de-mer (sea-cucumber) in the Kimberley and Arnhem Land regions, contact which extended over at least 200 years, Mulvaney concludes that the real "matter of considerable interest" (p.41) concerns "the rate at which non-material traits were assimilated into a culture traditionally termed 'conservative'" (p.41).

The massive changes in the means of production that this contact introduced (e.g., the dug-out canoe and sail and metal artifacts) are only mentioned in passing. The effects of these introductions on exploitation patterns, exchange systems and thus on social organisation are not even raised. A similar failure to bring out the historical tendency and its basis occurs in Mulvaney's discussion of contact between the horticulturally based, stratified societies in New Guinea and Black society in Cape York. He says that "the bow and arrow and horticultural practices were
restricted to Torres Strait" (p.49) but does not express any 'theoretical interest' in this situation (see also p.72 and more generally pp. 238-48).

In addition to what could be termed 'errors of omission' there is, in the same chapter, a major ideological view expressed on the significance of prehistory. This is the view that Australia's post-war involvement with Island South-East Asia merely repeats the inevitable focus laid down in prehistory and that the European colonisation of Australia was merely an "inadvertent shift" (p.51) in this focus. The wildly ahistorical assumptions embodied in this view, the complete neglect of the economic, social and political realities of the past 200 years and the neglect of pre-class societies outside the narrow northern coastal region say a lot about the conceived uses of prehistory for people like Mulvaney.

The chapter on "Landscape and People" contains very useful material on the relationship between natural resources, exploitation patterns, population density and mythology. What is omitted is any concept of a dynamic relationship. In many cases a quite mechanical determinist position is advanced, especially in concepts such as "optimum population level" (p.61ff) and "ecological adjustment" (p.68). These fail to take into account the continuously changing relationship between 'cultural adaptations' and fluctuating environmental conditions (not only seasonal but broader climatic changes and changing 'accessible' natural resources - in part determined by changing technology and exchange systems).

Also in this chapter the question of various racial theories about Black Australians is discussed, but purely in scholastic terms with not even a hint of awareness of the ideological import of the bulk of these studies. If any conclusion can be arrived at on the basis of studies of physical characteristics of Australian Blacks it must surely be the emphasis on the 'plasticity' of Homo sapiens rather than racial categorisation. This interpretation also means that physical anthropological studies (of skeletal material etc.) may not be as helpful in determining patterns of dispersal or migration as Mulvaney suggests and their importance has probably been greatly over-rated in the past. This view has obvious repercussions on the present dispute between physical anthropologists and Black militants over the digging up of skeletons. Mulvaney's view (p.198) of this dispute is politically naive though I accept his point about the importance of a knowledge of burial practices and grave goods (p.199).

The chapter on "Ethnohistory" touches on probably the single most important aspect of Black history, i.e. the seeming lack of economic movement beyond a sedentary, intensive exploitation of natural resources and the corresponding failure of the development of class society until recent times (and then only as a result of the dominance of European capitalism in Australia). Factors such as the rigorous enforcement of a conscious population control policy by contraception, infanticide etc., were undoubtedly of very great significance here.

Mulvaney makes very short work of a hoary old debate in academia about so-called 'ethnographic parallels' (i.e., the use of data from studies of recent pre-class or tribal societies to interpret the earlier development of human social organisation). He says that such material should be used by prehistorians provided they "use them as human documents and not in a formalistic manner in which earlier ethnographers selected data as a 'type' or fossilised evolutionary stage" (p.71). He proceeds to do this for cases such as the Mungo people (p.150ff).

In the chapter on "History and explanation" Mulvaney outlines the initial development of 'dirt archaeology' in Australia and the relationship of the explanatory theories advanced in the 1930's and 1940's to then contemporary developments in Britain is clear. Stone artifacts are the major, indeed almost only, 'definitions' of culture and supposed migrations are the 'explanations' of changes in these cultures. Elsewhere I have noted the socio-political basis of these interpretations - suffice it to say that they reflect an antiquarian and racist view of prehistory. The role of Radcliffe Brown and the Sydney Department of Anthropology at Sydney in stifling any historical research in the late 1920's and early 1930's is made clear by Mulvaney but his view of "the Depression" as the reason for no more chairs in anthropology being established needs quite a deal of

clarification." His outline of changes in his own terminological position over the last six years reflects the extreme and abstracted empiricism of his approach to this whole area of technology. He has still not developed any overall theoretical approach to make sense of the material.

The chapters on "Pleistocene origins", "The Australian Core Tool and Scraper Tradition", "Pleistocene beasts and fossil man" and "The Australian small tool tradition" provide more detailed empirical examples of the general weaknesses suggested above. The data in these sections could well be worked on by marxists interested in the articulation of climatic and environmental changes with technological developments, exploitation patterns, population density changes and changes in social organisation (including exchange patterns).

The length of time for human occupation of Australia seems to be at least 40,000 years and even this time period spans major changes in the natural environment associated with the terminal period of the Pleistocene era e.g., rising sea-level, changing rainfall and/or evaporation rates, altering vegetation distribution and the extinction of large mammals. The role of the cultural activities of man (fire and hunting) in some part of these two later developments seems probable (pp.208-9). As well, we now have abundant evidence of basic technology levels and changes but very little work on the relationship of this fundamental area to other aspects of social existence. The discussion of the 'core and scraper tradition' and the 'small tool tradition' often seems to degenerate into a scholastic emphasis on typologies or else an empiricist emphasis on site reports (what was dug up and where).

The chapter on "Incipient agriculturalists?" once more raises what I see as the major problem of the present material. Mulvaney's attempt to write off all theories of progress by saying that all they amount to are peculiarities of the European mind, is not only indicative of a failure to closely examine the significance of the available ethnohistorical or protohistorical evidence but is also a charge that can be leveled against his proposed replacement theory (?) of "balanced cultural ecology" (p.238). This concept is an extreme of mechanical determinism and is as much a product of European thought as are theories of progress.

It is of course absurd to claim that the 'acceptance' of the material possessions of Europeans evidences the economic stagnation of Black society, because the latter had no real control over the situation. But take the case of the Macassan visits in the north. There seems to be quite a deal of evidence that Blacks were easily able to get rid of the intruders if they did not want them and yet the same Blacks still accepted quite significant implements from them - implements which would undoubtedly have enabled much more efficient and intensive exploitation of resources and which also could have greatly affected systems of exchange (because of very high and obvious use-values). Once made available these implements were eagerly accepted and they conveyed obvious advantages. Hence the demand for a better technology existed but was not acted upon by Blacks themselves.

The potentially stultifying effects of ideology in this context cannot be lightly dismissed. Mulvaney's view of traditional Black life seems to be on the 'noble savage' end of the scale and he fails totally to take into account such factors as very high infant mortality rates or more contentious areas such as satisfaction of human needs. In any case the final arbiter of social existence - the historical process - has shown that this particular social formation cannot survive in its own right. Each of the general views has obvious current political implications which I will attempt to delineate in the next section.

The final chapter on "Field Archaeology" is simply a miscellany of empiricist work - carved trees, canoe trees, bark shelters, bark paintings, burials, fish traps, stone arrangements, stone pictures, quarry sites, rock art and decorated implements.

IV

The historical tendency of the pre-class societies referred to by Mulvaney was short-circuited by the European invasion. That invasion pitted a capitalist super-power against a scattered series of pre-class societies and it resulted in the physical destruction (with very few exceptions) of the latter. Indeed, as we have seen, it was very largely this realisation that was behind the
significant increase in public funding of the institutional bases of recent Australia prehistory.

Yet over a similar period of time there has also been a marked upsurge in Black militancy - initially merely demands for equality of economic assimilation into White Australian society, but by the mid to late 1960's becoming a demand for integration on the basis of a group of people possessing a distinctive cultural heritage. The Communist Party of Australia has effectively mirrored these changing demands in its changing policy on 'Aborigines' but too often this is where it has left the matter. The Party has not attempted a true class analysis of the Black movement.

The bourgeois use of prehistory (and other areas of anthropology) to combat the demands and position of radical Blacks has been quite blatant. The mythico-religious emphases of appeals to their 'traditions', the attempts to split 'traditional' and 'urban' Blacks for the purposes of land rights and other economic claims, the attempts to create and foster a Black bourgeoisie etc., all use much of the material referred to above interpreted in just the ways I have been criticising, i.e. in idealist or empiricist ways.

A historical materialist account of Black history shows instead that it is but one more instance of the process that precedes capitalism and that it was destroyed because of the needs of an expanding capitalist power in the nineteenth century. From this point of view the attempts to 'revive' traditional lifestyles can be seen as an attempt initiated and encouraged by the bourgeoisie to maintain a permanent 'living museum' in certain areas (e.g., Arnhem Land) and as a way of mystifying Blacks in areas where militant demands seem more dangerous (e.g. NSW). In other words it is an attempt to keep Blacks living in an oppressed and helpless state. The historical materialist or marxist understanding of Black history enables us to realise that pre-class social formations are not viable as progressive components of a decaying capitalist system and that those Blacks who want to take control over their own lives by challenging the State over questions such as Land Rights and who realise the necessity of joining with the proletariat to win these struggles, are those who should be supported.

At the same time one should not be insensitive to the growth of a Black identity and the relationship to their own history that this implies. The valuable insights into social organisation in a classless social formation and the ways in which a technologically impoverished culture attempted to conquer nature are examples of progressive aspects that have permanent historical importance for progressive peoples.

It is clear that my view of the political lessons that emerge from a historical materialist interpretation of Black history is only rudimentary. This whole area of marxist scholarship is virtually untouched and requires a great deal of further work.

V

In conclusion I would simply emphasise the importance of studies of pre-class social formations for marxists since the 'object' of these is an elementary forerunner of communist, classless society and hence provides some information on the nature of future social relations in a stateless context etc. Also these studies both are illuminated by and in turn clarify the historical materialist method itself. In light of this I see Mulvaney's book as a valuable source of data but even agreeing with his claim that "the surviving archaeological evidence is restricted both in its variety and interpretative potential" (p.69), I feel that the book does not begin to tap what 'interpretative potential' is there. Only the marxist method can do that in a way relevant to the needs of the majority of people (both Black and White) in the contemporary world.

Bibliography


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