

**Diane Austin-Broos, *A Different Inequality: The Politics of Debate about Remote Aboriginal Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2011.**

Diane Austin-Broos is one of Australia's most eminent anthropologists, an emeritus Professor at the University of Sydney and author of the well-regarded monograph, *Arrente Present, Arrente Past, Invasion, violence and imagination in Indigenous Central Australia* (Chicago, 2009). Yet, her latest book is a serious disappointment. Towards the end of her densely argued text, she observes that, '[w]ithin universities at least', political debate about remote Aboriginal Australia has been dominated by two concerns: the maintenance of self-sufficient communities and the economic arrangements (including state-support) needed to sustain them; and the human rights of indigenous people, which, outside of government, were widely seen as directly targetted by the Northern Territory Intervention. Austin-Broos focuses on the limitations of these perspectives, arguing that neither takes sufficient account of the historical positioning of Aboriginal people in a state and an economy, both of which are alien to their traditional culture and largely indifferent to their concerns. Anthropologists who have argued for self-sufficiency/separatism, albeit a self-sufficiency that depends on substantial state-support, have worked with a reified notion of tradition, thereby misunderstanding the forms of difference, mediated by the state, that Aboriginal people currently endure. Against the academic defenders, of Aboriginal autonomy, Austin-Broos insists on the need for 'mainstream primary education in remote communities'. While this view is easily portrayed as undermining autonomy and as just another version of assimilation, Austin-Broos presents mainstream education as the best hope for providing individuals with basic literacy and numeracy – the foundations of what she persists in calling the 'human capital' required for economic participation and for effective indigenous citizenship.

Readers who are unfamiliar with the material Austin-Broos discusses are likely to feel that this conclusion, which is presented in several forms in the final chapter and strongly suggested in the first, is thoroughly humane and sensible. In practice, many readers of the book are likely to give up before they get to this point, having been discouraged by the density of the text – although I should note, in fairness, that the flyleaf quotes another leading anthropologist's description of the book as 'lucid and accessible' (there are differing standards of clarity and accessibility). Others, after sampling a few of the earlier pages, will opt for the less valiant course of heading straight for the book's conclusion and leaving the rest to one side.

Unfortunately, in spite of the apparent good sense of Austin-Broos' conclusion, the argument leading up to it is plagued by serious problems. One concerns the difficulty of offering a tendentious description of a complex field of academic dispute in terms suitable for both public and academic reception. (This difficulty is compounded by Austin-Broos' evident concern to address the policy implications of the views she examines). She attempts to deal with this problem by representing the field of dispute as if it were divided into two broad camps: separatists and anti-separatists. Neither of these standpoints is clearly defined, although we do learn that the former celebrate cultural difference and favour land rights, self-determination and forms of employment that do

not fall into the mainstream economy (Austin-Broos repeatedly insinuates that members of this camp are indifferent to, or at least tolerant of, Aboriginal suffering and disadvantage) and that the latter, in contrast, are concerned about suffering and disadvantage but impatient with cultural difference, tending to favour equality and assimilation. The separatist camp is represented in this book by many anthropologists and, most particularly, by members of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) which is based at ANU, while the anti-separatist camp includes such unlikely bedfellows as Bob Gregory, Helen Hughes – the Centre for Independent Studies' favourite economist – and Noel Pearson. The trouble with this forcing of a wide range of diverse views and those who represent them into two broad camps is that it risks or, as in this case, succeeds overwhelmingly in, distorting or otherwise misrepresenting what many of them actually say, as Jon Altman (New Matilda, 19-08-2011) and Tim Rowse (Inside Story, 03-08-2011) have argued in their reviews.

A second area of difficulty arises from an issue with which many academics are only too familiar, which is that academic discourse operates in a different register from that of public policy. While there are a few exceptions in the areas of economic and environmental policy, it is clear that Australian governments have displayed little interest in, or open contempt for, the arguments of academics. Where Austin-Broos adds the qualification noted earlier, '[w]ithin universities at least' she appears to recognise this difference between academic and policy talk. Nevertheless, while, as emeritus Professor, she writes from within a university, she clearly aims to have an impact on policy, as in her arguments for mainstream primary education. Unfortunately, she does not clearly address the obvious practical problem of how to persuade Commonwealth and NT governments to properly fund and organise this development – this may be one reason why she feels that Australia needs the effective Aboriginal citizenship which is to be fostered by mainstream primary education for children in remote Aboriginal communities. Nor, as Tim Rowse has noted in his review, does she show how to arouse the commitment of Aboriginal parents to what she earnestly believes would be better education for their children. One could hardly ask for a clearer illustration of the point made at the beginning of this paragraph. At most, Austin-Broos' analysis offers a new rhetorical camouflage, should Australian governments ever feel they are under-resourced in this respect, for yet more heavy-handed state/commonwealth intervention in educational provision for remote Aboriginal communities.

*Barry Hindess is an Adjunct Professor in the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University and an associate of the Centre for the Study of Australian Politics.*