ETHNOCENTRIC REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE

Historical representations of Indigenous Australians were influenced by the ethnocentric views of British colonists. At this time, there were competing philosophical views about indigenous peoples around the world. The following are some of the more prominent:

1) The Noble Savage: Australian Aborigines were admired for their courage and freedom, living simple, contented lives. This view was influenced by descriptions of Polynesian societies by Frenchman, Jean-Jacques Rosseau (1719-1778)

2) The Great Chain of Being: This was a hierarchical ranking of all living beings. Europeans were placed as the highest ranking and Indigenous Australians the lowest, nearest the animals. The pseudoscience of phrenology was very influential in these claims of biological differences. The theory claimed that the shape and bumps on a person’s head approximated the personalities, abilities and size of the brain within. Working on this theory it was assessed that Indigenous Australians were both a morally and intellectually inferior race.

3) Natural Selection: The scientific theory proposed by Charles Darwin is used to explain the evolution of the natural world. Darwin’s theory was twisted by people like Herbert Spencer and applied to human societies in the context of ‘survival of the fittest’. This form of ‘scientific racism’ was used to ‘prove’ that Australian Aboriginals were a doomed and dying race. The phrase ‘smoothing the pillow of a dying race’ was used to justify the need to ‘protect’ Indigenous survivors of colonisation through segregation on reserves.

CONTEMPORARY ETHNOCENTRISM

1) Exclusion of ATSI peoples from representations such as print and television advertising (apart from the occasional use of stereotypes (friendly old, outback Aborigine).

2) Stereotypical portrayals of Indigenous Australian people in tourism reflecting ‘the noble savage’.

3) The ongoing myth in film and television that most Indigenous Australians live in remote and regional parts of Australia.

4) The over-reporting in news and current affairs programs of Indigenous Australians as victims and perpetrators of violence and/or paternalistic reporting of social disadvantage.