To point out that assimilationists contested assimilation might, at first glance, seem banal. There is never complete unanimity over policy, and still less over practice; there is always disagreement over tactics, pace and procedure. Did contention over assimilation, however, extend beyond mere squabbling over strategy? On the face of it, there is a case to answer. When the linguist T G H Strehlow urged assimilation through strengthening the authority structures of Indigenous societies, he would seem to have envisaged outcomes, as well as processes, different to those entailed by assimilation through the dismantling of Aboriginal groups. When the anthropologist A P Elkin celebrated cultural syncretism — the ‘blending’ of European with Aboriginal elements — the outcomes of the assimilation he promoted would seem significantly different to those of assimilationist programs premised on the dissolution of Indigenous cultures.

In this article I will focus on the writings of these two prominent advocates of assimilation, comparing their arguments with those of another notable assimilationist, Paul Hasluck, who, as Commonwealth Minister for Territories from 1951 to 1963, was enormously influential in shaping assimilation policy and practice, not only in his own jurisdiction of the Northern Territory but throughout Australia. By revisiting the arguments of these three protagonists, I want to problematise the concept of assimilation as the dominant paradigm within which discussion of Aboriginal affairs took place in the two decades after the second world war. Assimilation sought national cohesion, but the route to, and the entailments of, national cohesion were matters of contention. Assimilation was a dispersed and conflicted discourse, and only by appreciating this fact, rather than reducing it to a singular, unified strategy, can we comprehend its potency and credibility.

If assimilation was a site of contestation, what were the big issues of contention among assimilationists? My own strictures against reductionism notwithstanding, two key issues emerge: as a social process, whether assimilation should proceed on an individualist basis or in terms of social groups; and as a cultural process, whether it entailed the comprehensive collapse of Indigenous cultures, or an amalgamation of Indigenous and western traditions. The former of these lines of dissent has been examined elsewhere, most notably by Tim Rowse, whose studies counterpose the individualist assimilation promoted by Hasluck to the collectivist approach urged by certain anthropologists, including Strehlow and Elkin. According to Hasluck, Indigenous societies had been comprehensively shattered by the impact of the west, leaving a residue of ‘stranded individuals’ bereft of social support or cultural integrity, whose only viable future lay in becoming full members of the Australian nation by adopting, in toto, its (presumed) mores, values and ‘way of life’.5
So committed was Hasluck to the individual as the subject of assimilationist endeavour that he could represent Aboriginal social collapse as a liberating process; at the 1959 Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS) meeting he suggested that ‘the weakness of the old aboriginal society and of the present-day groups of aborigines is an advantage. The more it crumbles the more readily may its fragments be mingled with the rest of the people living in Australia’. Although he qualified this by acknowledging that ‘the disappearance of aboriginal society leaves the aboriginal person with limited capacity to assert himself or to serve his own interests’, his rendition of future possibilities was stark: ‘What happens is that the aboriginal society collapses and the stranded individual either lives and dies an outcast or enters the Australian society’.6

It might have been with Hasluck’s statement in mind that, a year later, Strehlow complained that those responsible for the implementation of assimilation too often assumed:

that true progress could be achieved only by pulling up all the foundations of the old social order and by replacing the outmoded aboriginal culture with the European type of culture found in the white Australian community. It has been admitted that these drastic measures would lead to the catastrophic fragmentation of the old aboriginal groupings; but the claim has been advanced that the resultant multifarious splinters would be ready for quick absorption by the white Australian community.7

Social fragmentation, he insisted, unfailingly wrought social havoc: ‘To destroy the old group loyalties, even with the best of intentions, always brings chaos in its train’, thereby impeding rather than promoting the goal of assimilation.8 Elkin, too, insisted that the cohesion of Aboriginal groups must be maintained: ‘Through their own group life, continuity with the past will be retained; social security in the present be experienced; and assurance for the future certain. These are essential principles for a people’s well-being’.9 More tersely, he asserted that ‘The Aborigines must move up in groups’.10

According to Strehlow and Elkin, the complex socio-cultural processes of assimilation were ill-served by policies and procedures that assumed the primacy of the abstract autonomous individual. In a formulation that bears the imprint of the Durkheimian ideas prevalent among anthropologists of his generation, Strehlow urged his fellow white Australians to:

grasp the true core of the assimilation problem and begin to realize that individuals can be assimilated into a human society only through their membership in one or the other of the many small groups which in their totality constitute this society.11

The Durkheimian legacy was still more pronounced in Elkin’s writings on human societies and social change.12 Strong and potent group solidarities provided the only antidotes to the anomic and associated ills of modern life, and the only vehicles through which the hazards of social change could be successfully negotiated.13 Accordingly, the cohesiveness of Aboriginal groups should be actively encouraged, no matter whether they be the groupings of ‘traditional’ Aboriginal societies or those created through contact with whites.
In his 1944 polemic, *Citizenship for the Aborigines*, Elkin listed twelve ‘general principles’ for an appropriate Aboriginal policy, the first of which was that ‘Group — or community — life is of fundamental importance to persons of Aboriginal descent’, a principle he insisted applied ‘whether the region be isolated, marginal, or closely settled; whether the Aborigines be full-blood or mixed-blood and even of lighter caste’. Confronting Hasluck at the 1959 ANZAAS Congress, he maintained: ‘Sociology and history suggest that the advancement of Aborigines will be in group formation not as individuals’. This may have been the first occasion on which Elkin publicly aired his dispute with the Minister, but his criticisms of the Minister’s individualistic approach to assimilation go back to at least early 1953, when he wrote a robust critique of Hasluck’s *Welfare Ordinance*. In line with — indeed, as a part of — their promotion of Indigenous group cohesion, Elkin and Strehlow urged cultural syncretism as an essential factor in assimilation. Elkin’s forays in this field go back to the late 1920s when, as a priest as well as an anthropologist, he advocated a reformed missionary policy in Australia in line with the global trend toward a syncretic model of Christian conversion. Religious resonances persisted in some of his later commentary on cultural change, as when he referred to Aborigines ‘furnishing their lives with treasures both old as well as new’, though commonly he wrote more prosaically of ‘cultural blending’ or ‘building the new into the old’. In an article on human rights published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1949, he elevated cultural syncretism to the level of fundamental right, arguing that ‘native peoples’ must be granted access ‘to world thought, science, technical achievement, literature and religion, to be used and built into their own changing culture as they find possible’, for it was a ‘basic right of primitive man ... to be civilised according to the pattern which he will develop — to each separate people its own pattern — but fitting into the general pattern of human values and rights on the world scale’. As this and his other writings make clear, in the resultant cultural blend western elements were to preponderate over the Indigenous, but not completely supplant them. The important point, as far as Elkin was concerned, was that cultural blending ensured continuity in processes of cultural change. Attempts to simply substitute one culture with another were doomed to disaster, for a culture that satisfied the human need for meaning and purpose in life could only be a culture rooted in a people’s own collective history.

Elkin was adamant on the necessity of far-reaching socio-cultural change in Aboriginal communities; but that change must build upon, not obliterate, the existing cultural heritage. ‘Change and contact’, he declared, ‘must come’:

But it should be so organized or approached that the Aborigines will not lose their ‘dreaming’ without building in its place, probably on its foundation, another view of life and another sanction for behaviour, which will keep their personalities integrated (their souls healthy or ‘saved’) and which will prevent them from lapsing into a condition of moral apathy and ‘lawlessness’. This process, being intellectual and emotional, individual and social, is not easy. It cannot be accomplished by a fiat: ‘your old view is outmoded, here is a new one — a new philosophy, a new religion!’ It must be worked out slowly by them as a group, and in the long run (certainly in the isolated and most of the marginal regions) it will be an Aboriginal version of the European view of life and religion.
As Elkin acknowledged, syncretism was a process in which Aboriginal people exercised agency, collectively determining how the processes of cultural change should proceed, though their agency was predicated on an assumption that cultural renovation and modernisation were desired, and diluted by a presumption that the professional experts on culture — anthropologists — should offer guidance. Moreover, syncretism (for all its lopsidedness) entailed recognition of the intrinsic worth of Aboriginal culture, an acknowledgement that Aborigines themselves contributed positively to the process of modernisation in which they were (presumed to be) inexorably engaged.

Against these views, Hasluck contended that Aboriginal cultures were doomed to dissolution. He insisted that his policy of assimilation ‘does not mean the suppression of the aboriginal culture’, but this was predicated on an assumption that ‘suppression’ was superfluous. The ‘breaking down of tribal life’ and consequent cultural decay were simply ‘inevitable’. Hasluck did allow for the survival of a residue of aesthetic elements — proud reminders of past ‘origins and traditions’ — and he conceded that cultural nostalgia — ‘the stirrings of old traditions’ — might persist after Indigenous societies had comprehensively collapsed. He did not demand a total erasure of Aboriginal identities and cultural heritage. The assimilationist propaganda pamphlets published under his authority in the late 1950s and early 1960s frequently and fulsomely reiterated the point that ‘Assimilation does not mean that the aborigines should lose their racial identity, or lose contact with their arts, their crafts and their philosophy’.

The context of these statements, however, indicates that what was envisaged was merely the preservation of fragments of folklore after Aboriginal cultures had been comprehensively shattered. Distinctive Aboriginal cultures, in the ‘thick’ anthropological sense of frameworks within which meaning, purpose and value are socially constructed, had no future and little present pertinence. As sources of meaning, purpose and value, Indigenous cultures had been rendered futile, even harmful, by the demands of modernity. To adjust to those demands, Aborigines had no choice but to replace the old culture with the new.

The notion that Indigenous cultures could contribute dynamically and positively to the assimilation process — in Elkin’s terms, providing ‘the foundations of future development’ — was alien to Hasluck’s model of assimilation. According to the latter, the attachment of individual Aborigines to their cultural frameworks was an impediment to assimilation, a perverse clinging to outmoded ways. In fact, Hasluck’s assimilation aimed not so much at cultural change as at individuals exchanging one culture for another, as a package, a ready-made ‘way of life’. This conception is nicely exemplified in Hasluck’s account of the life and untimely death of Albert Namatjira, which, he claimed, illustrated:

> the human tragic struggle — of a man midway between two cultures. That insistence by some on the reassertion of the aboriginal culture side by side with the ministry of others in a contrary direction made the tragedy … The tragedy of being an aboriginal for him was not due to the fact that he was discriminated against or treated unfairly but to the insistence — whether of himself or under the influence of others — that he be an aboriginal.

In this rendition, the individual treads a path between two cultures; his or her destination is already known, as is the point of departure, and success in the
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journey demands discarding the baggage of an outworn culture. Assimilation is a
linear trajectory from the Aboriginal to the western, and mixing the two could only
muddle the passage.

As a missionary’s son, Strehlow had grown up with the Namatjiras and other
Arrernte people at Hermannsburg. He put a very different slant on the Namatjira
tragedy. In his view, Namatjira could not be other than Aboriginal, and his death
was due to white Australians impossibly demanding otherwise, allowing his
membership of the nation only on condition that ‘he came on his own, free from
the contaminating influences of Aranda society, as a man in whom European
artistic achievements had obliterated the old stains of Aranda culture’.

Nonetheless, there was significant concurrence here between Hasluck and
Strehlow, for Hasluck too claimed that Namatjira (and other Aborigines) could
purchase acceptability to white Australians only at the price of their Indigenous
cultures. On the morality, or necessity, of this fact (if fact it were) they were poles
apart.

In one of a series of booklets pleading for a reformed assimilationist policy and
practice, Strehlow remarked, ‘Many of us are apt to think that the native problem
could be solved if the natives could be made to give up their own human
individuality and to copy us in all points’. Attempting to disabuse white
Australians of this presumption, he pointed out that ‘we’ were not really so
morally admirable as to deserve such emulation, ‘they’ were far from so culturally
and socially bankrupt as commonly supposed, and in any case, such simple
‘copying’ was an impossibility. What was necessary, he urged, was ‘an
assimilation policy that will not involve the complete annihilation of Australian
aboriginal culture’. He also maintained that ‘assimilation’, as pursued by
governments of the day, was not a new policy ‘but only a new name given to the
old and discredited methods of forced cultural change which have been employed
in Australia for the last century and a half’ and which merely ‘produced fringe
dwellers, not enlightened citizens’. For ‘well over a century and a half’, he
maintained:

the one course most persistently advocated has been the impossible one — that of
obliterating completely the whole past cultural and historical background of the
aboriginal Australians. At times, misguided reformers have attempted to achieve
this result by taking children away from their native parents in order to bring them
up as whites. Such a plan always and inevitably must fail.

Like Elkin, Strehlow insisted that Aboriginal traditions and institutions must be
respected, and their cultures and social groupings maintained, not as an exercise
in cultural preservation for its own sake but as part of the vital process of socio-
cultural renovation.

So far, my emphasis has been on disputes over the process of assimilation,
whether it should proceed through the individual or the group, through cultural
amalgamation or cultural decay. These might suggest differences in outcome; for
example, that the Strehlow-Elkin model would lead to the perpetuation of
Aboriginal social orders and cultures, whereas the Hasluck model would not. In
fact, neither Elkin nor Strehlow proclaimed a commitment to the preservation, in
perpetuity, of Indigenous social orders or cultures as a deliberate goal of policy.
Rather, they asserted, these social groups and these cultural configurations were
the facts, now and for the foreseeable future, with which policy had to deal. To
deny or dismiss these socio-cultural facts, as Hasluck and many other
assimilationists did, was to court disaster. As for the long-term future of
Aboriginal socio-cultural distinctiveness, both were agnostic.\textsuperscript{32} Although he was
ambivalent and inconsistent on this issue, Elkin rated very low the prospects for
communities of mixed-descent Aborigines in southern Australian maintaining
cultural distinctiveness beyond a limited transition period. Alternatively, he
considered that communities of ‘full-blood’ Aborigines in the more remote north
and centre of the continent had better prospects for creating viable distinctive
cultures compounded out of traditional and western elements, though even for
these his long-term prognosis was hesitant and guarded.\textsuperscript{33}

There is an implicit, and occasionally explicit, assumption in the arguments of
both Elkin and Strehlow that the long-term survival of Aboriginal cultural
distinctiveness was a question beyond the legitimate sphere of policy-makers and
governments. Rather, efforts should focus on facilitating the over-arching and
agreed-upon objective of assimilation: the inclusion of Indigenous Australians as
equal citizens of the nation. For all Strehlow’s and Elkin’s insistence on the
maintenance of Aboriginal groups and Aboriginal cultures, do their proposals boil
down to merely sociologically more sophisticated endeavours to achieve the same
end as Hasluck? If the end is construed as harmoniously integrated nationhood,
then the answer is yes. Since integrated nationhood was conceptualised
differently, however, in terms of intersecting social groups rather than as an
aggregation of individuals, the entailments for Aboriginal citizens differed
significantly between the Hasluck and the Elkin-Strehlow models of assimilation.

Moreover, whereas the Hasluck model demanded Aboriginal citizens conform
precisely to an already-written cultural script, the other model allowed parts of the
script to be rewritten and rearranged. Certainly, Strehlow, and still more Elkin,
prescribed specific attributes to be acquired in the course of assimilation; and their
rendition of responsible citizenship accorded with dominant mid-century, middle-
class Australian norms.\textsuperscript{34} In their version, the attributes of the assimilated
Aborigine were not entirely predetermined. The essential difference between these
two models of assimilation, in terms of outcome, was not that one decreed the
demise of Indigenous socio-cultural orders while the other demanded their
persistence in perpetuity; it is simply that one foreclosed on the possibilities of the
future, whereas the other kept open the possibility of Indigenous cultures and
social orders, albeit in modified form, continuing into the indefinite future.

Paradoxically, though in line with his liberal principles, Hasluck made a point
of denying that governments could control the course of social change.\textsuperscript{35} Despite
this, his model of assimilation was predicated on the assumption that the trajectory
of Aboriginal socio-cultural change was both fixed and already known:
deterioration, if not quite into oblivion, at least into mere folkloric fragments was
the obvious conclusion. In his voluminous writings on Aboriginal affairs, Hasluck
never represented Indigenous societies as simply changing, modifying or
adapting, but always as collapsing, decaying or expiring. Indigenous societies
were beyond redemption; Indigenous individuals were not. Their choice of
cultural future was predetermined by the dissolution of their cultural past.
Strehlow and Elkin were certainly not averse to invoking the language of cultural and social decay, but they recognised that, at least over much of the continent, Indigenous social structures and cultures still flourished and that the decay that had occurred was remediable. Where this was so, all effort should be made to revitalise and reinvigorate Aboriginal tradition.\textsuperscript{36} Tradition, both insisted, offered the only secure basis for change; social change must proceed by building on, not demolishing, the heritage of tradition borne by a people. Arguing this point, Elkin drew on an eclectic anthropology that wove together (not always seamlessly) evolutionism, functionalism, diffusionism and, increasingly in the post-war years, American cultural anthropology.\textsuperscript{37} All these strands were given a decidedly conservative inflection, so much so that Elkin can sound like nothing so much as a latter-day Edmund Burke, with his horror of radical social change and his insistence on tradition and continuity. Traditions were not fixed and immutable, nor were Indigenous and Western cultures entirely incompatible. A fusion of the two offered best prospects for social change in the short term, and survival in the longer.

Have I merely sketched out a minor dispute between the Minister for Territories and two anthropologists holding idiosyncratic views on how assimilation might proceed? By way of conclusion, I want to suggest one larger implication of their disagreement. Strehlow and Elkin articulated a conservative critique of a dominant (state-sponsored) model of assimilation and the social and cultural assumptions on which it rested. Others, ranging from clergymen to communists, from Aboriginal activists to feminists, expressed far more radical criticisms centred on the same issues: the disregard of Aboriginal group belonging and the deprecation of cultural traditions. Into the 1960s, criticism rose to a chorus of condemnation, roundly denouncing government policies of assimilation as an assault upon Aboriginal people.

Nonetheless, it is misleading to conceive dispute over Aboriginal affairs in the fifties and sixties primarily in terms of opposed camps of assimilationists and anti-assimilationists, even though some of the political rhetoric of the time can lend itself to such a dichotomy. The grounds of agreement and disagreement between those who endorsed and those who repudiated the terminology of assimilation were fluid and uncertain. The term ‘assimilation’ itself was unstable in meaning, a fact remarked on by many of its detractors as well as supporters. Some critics urged a change in terminology to signify a change in the terms of Aboriginal inclusion in the citizen body. ‘Integration’ was the preference of many, following usage of the term in the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 107 of 1957. Those urging the adoption of ‘integration’ invariably drew attention to its endorsement of group solidarity and cultural continuity as attributes fully compatible with national inclusiveness.\textsuperscript{39} Some proffered alternative labels. The Presbyterian Reverend V W Coombes, for example, advocated ‘incorporation’, to denote a union of Indigenous Australians with other Australians ‘but without loss of separate personality’; this, he suggested, befitted a nationhood encompassing a ‘vast diversity in a single community’.\textsuperscript{40}

Through the 1960s, others conceded that ‘assimilation’ was the established term, needing not abandonment but redefinition. The Anglican Canon F W Coaldrake, for example, pointed out that ‘integration’ was no less polysemous
than ‘assimilation’; therefore it was ‘preferable to adhere to the word at present accepted but define its application in more detail’, particularly in regard to ‘the permanence inhering in an Aboriginal people’.

An interesting instance is the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship, whose original (1956) constitution endorsed the objective of ‘assimilation’, but changed to ‘integration’ a few years later; yet in 1966 the Fellowship could still urge the NSW government to change policy ‘either by adoption of “integration” … or by retaining the word “assimilation” but defining and interpreting it’ such that Aborigines could ‘retain elements of their group and cultural life if that is their choice’.

Others again maintained that arguing over terminology and definitions was a pointless exercise when what was desperately needed was to set up processes whereby Aboriginal people might be empowered to act with some autonomy and dignity. Anthropologist Marie Reay was highly critical of government assimilation programs, and wrote in her introduction to a 1964 collection of papers that:

I have no desire to see the official policy of ‘assimilation’ changed to one of ‘integration’, ‘apartheid’, or anything else. The label is not important … Policy should be flexible enough to enable [Aborigines] to make their own choices without being brainwashed by do-gooders and petty officials.

She emphasised that Aboriginal policy should shift emphasis from the individual to the community, and take account of the viability of Aboriginal culture and traditions. This, through all the welter of disputation and terminological confusion, was the persistent refrain of those seeking reform in Aboriginal affairs.

Few critics of government policy in the 1950s and 60s questioned the goal of Aboriginal inclusion, as equal and participatory members of the Australian nation. The terms of inclusion were in dispute, and on this issue the disputants did not line up neatly as pro- and anti-assimilationists. Dissension over the terms of inclusion — as groups or as individuals, through processes of cultural amalgamation or of cultural atrophy — was intrinsic to assimilationism. The question of why state policies typically followed the individualist line, with its concomitant of cultural supersession, is beyond the scope of this article. Other options were offered, not merely by a fringe of disaffected radicals, but by conservative proponents of assimilation itself.
Assimilationists Contest Assimilation: T G H Strehlow and A P Elkin on Aboriginal Policy
Russell McGregor

1 This is a revised and expanded version of a paper originally presented to the ‘Assimilation: Then and Now’ Conference, University of Sydney, 30 November – 1 December 2000. My thanks to the conference participants, and especially its convenor, Tim Rowse, for their helpful suggestions.


5 This rendition of the dilemma facing Indigenous people was articulated in Hasluck’s earlier writings on assimilation; see for example the collection of his speeches from 1950-52 published under the title Native Welfare in Australia, Paterson Brokensha, Perth, 1953. He argued the point more fulsomely and coherently in the later 1950s; see especially Hasluck, ‘Some problems of assimilation’, ANZAAS Address, 1959, and ‘Are our Aborigines neglected?’, PSA Address, 1959; both in University of Sydney Archives, Elkin Papers (EP), box 80, items 1/12/295 and 1/12/294.


15 Elkin, ‘Assimilation and integration’.


17 McGregor, loc cit.

18 See for example Elkin, ‘Kinship, the Dreaming and the Dance’, *Hermes: Magazine of the University of Sydney*, vol 49, no 1, 1947, p 9; ‘Aboriginal languages and assimilation’, p 154; Elkin to Henry Wardlaw, Secretary, Victorian Council for Aboriginal Rights, 12 July 1951, EP, box 182, item 4/2/313.


20 Elkin, *Citizenship for the Aborigines*, op cit, p 40.


22 Hasluck to R S Leydin, Administrator, Northern Territory, 2 January 1952, National Archives of Australia (NAA), series A452, item 1952/162.


26 Hasluck, ‘Some problems’ op cit.


28 Strehlow, *Dark and White*, op cit, p 11.


31 Strehlow, *Dark and White*, op cit, p 21.


Notes to pp 48-51


38 See for example Elkin, *Society, the Individual and Change*, op cit, p 65.

39 See for example the extracts from *Smoke Signals*, October 1959, and ‘Council for Aboriginal Rights, report by Kath Walker … October 1962’, both in Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus (eds), *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights: A Documentary History*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1999, pp 178, 186-90. ILO Convention 107 specifically excluded ‘measures tending towards the artificial assimilation’ of Indigenous peoples (Article 2.2c). Although it designated its ‘primary objective’ as ‘the fostering of individual dignity, and the advancement of individual usefulness and initiative’ (Article 2.3), it clearly endorsed a model of socio-cultural ‘advancement’ on a group basis, with due regard for Indigenous ‘customs and institutions’ (Articles 4, 5, 7, 8).


41 Canon F W Coaldrake to P Hasluck, 5 December 1962, NAA, A452/1, 1962/7391.

42 Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship, Submissions to the Joint Committee of the NSW Legislative Council and Legislative Assembly upon Aboriginal Welfare, January 1966, NAA, A2354, 1968/25.

43 Marie Reay, ‘Introduction’ to M Reay (ed), *Aborigines Now: New Perspectives in the Study of Aboriginal Communities*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1964, pp xvi-xx. W.E.H. Stanner contributed a Foreword to the Reay collection; although Stanner was an exceptionally astute and astringent critic of official assimilation policies, he was prepared to countenance a more open-ended assimilationism, and even to retain the word, provided it did not harden into inflexible dogma; see Tim Rowse, *Obliged to be Difficult: Nugget Coomb’s Legacy in Indigenous Affairs*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp 26-7, 91-3, 135.