

Uighurs and glass houses

Mike Scrafton^[1] (#fn:1), *John Menadue – Pearls and Irritations*, 5 December 2019

The West's modern sensibility is rightly offended by the scale of Uighur incarcerations in Xinjiang the and the ruthlessness with which the Chinese government is pursuing the extermination of Uighur culture, language, and religion. To the contemporary mind these acts are repugnant. This notwithstanding, the darker episodes in European and American history nonetheless should be kept in mind when crafting condemnations of China.

The criticism of China's Uighur policies from the political leadership of the Western democracies has been muted, only becoming audible since the recent leaking of the trove of documents. Shamefully, it has taken wide media coverage of this public confirmation of China's transgressions to prompt Western leaders to condemn the treatment of the Uighurs. This criticism should have been quicker and clearer and uncompromising but any sense of intrinsic moral superiority or assertions that similarly malign acts cannot occur in a democracy should have been avoided.

The understanding of individual human rights and the valuing of the autonomy and dignity of human beings that were articulated and written into the UN Declaration of Human Rights were there at the insistence of the victorious Allies. Outside of Europe and North America these values received only nominal acceptance and perhaps to the majority of the world's population were contrary to their accepted norms, beliefs, and standards. China does not recognise them.

Given the persistence of Jim Crow laws in the US and the ongoing wars of the Europeans to retain their colonies in Algeria, Vietnam, Southern Africa, the Congo, and Indonesia at the time there was a tinge of hypocrisy in this. These were the last remnants of two Western practices which were far more injurious to far more people than the present Chinese crimes; colonisation and slavery.

It is now quite shocking to read the US Congressional debates pertaining to slavery or to explore the dispossession, deculturation, and extermination of native Americans. Not less than the Chinese today I suspect, many nineteenth and twentieth century American leaders, officials and legislators adhered to an ideology that justified outrageous acts against fellow human beings. It was an ideology based on racial notions that held white people as the superior race and as the carriers of a superior white 'civilization'; notions that saw millions of Africans reduced to chattel status and a cultural genocide perpetrated on indigenous tribes.

The Chinese treatment of the Uighurs is, according to highly credible reports, cruel and inhumane, and is undeniably an assault on, and denial of, their liberty, autonomy and dignity. But it's not comparable to the abominable institution of slavery. Slave-holders and believers in the reality of the natural racial hierarchy, and this included prominent politicians, clergy, philosophers, and scientists, denied Africans were fully human or that they possessed the innate intellectual or moral capacities to ever be equal with whites.

For most of the advocates of slavery even a forced re-education program for Africans along the lines of the Chinese in Xinjiang would have been futile. Even with the abolition of slavery a virulent strain of racism continued to infuse US public life. The ideas of racial superiority that bolstered slavery in the antebellum democracy have persisted in sections of American society beyond slavery's abolition to find expression in segregationist policies, anti-miscegenation legislation, and today in white supremacist and white nationalist movements. It was only in 1967 that the US Supreme Court declared anti-miscegenation legislation to be unconstitutional.

In December 1817 the US Secretary for War forwarded to the House of Congress a report on 'the progress which has been made in the civilisation of the Indian tribes'. He advised that the Indians 'must be brought gradually under our authority and laws, or they will insensibly waste away in vice and misery'. 'It is impossible', the Secretary declared, 'with their customs, that they should exist as independent communities, in the midst of civilised society'. He recommended that they 'should be taken under our guardianship; and our opinion, and not theirs, ought to prevail, in measures intended for their civilization and happiness'. Conclusions that would resonate with Xi Jiang's attitude to the Uighurs.

First through removals, then reservations, the US government adopted 'a strategy which sought to change Indian tribes politically, socially, and economically'. Like the Chinese approach to the 'Uighur problem', the US saw re-education and assimilation as the solution to the 'Indian problem'. The 'civilisation' of the native Americans and the relentless colonisation of the American frontier saw their numbers decimated.

It would be possible to add to these past and unpardonable breaches of contemporary standards by adding an inventory of the transgressions of the European colonial powers as they sought to convert their pagan subject peoples around the world by stamping out cultural, social, and religious practises with which they disagreed. The harms from these policies persist.

Events across time in different nations and under differing circumstances are not directly comparable. However, some equivalence can be recognised in the nature and the scale of the harms suffered by the victims and the role played by intolerance for other ethnicities, cultures, and religions or by ideological views on racial or civilizational superiority. These are things that have yet to be fully expunged from western democracies and seem in fact to be growing.

The Uighurs do not deserve what the Chinese are doing to them any more than the Africans and native Americans did, or the millions and millions of colonial peoples. Our disapproval of the events in Xinjiang should be made clear. This should happen in a context where western nations are consistent in accepting their own difficult and uncertain journeys to recognition of human rights and one humanity. It should happen in a context where criticism is consistent and predictable in calling out wrong doing everywhere. Because if it's selective for whatever reason it is meaningless and patently hypocritical.

1. Mike Scrafton was a Deputy Secretary in the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment, senior Defence executive, CEO of a state statutory body, and chief of staff and ministerial adviser to the minister for defence. ↩ (#fnref:1)