

Racism, Multiculturalism and the Immigration Debate

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A Bibliographic Essay

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The past decade has seen the development of a major consensus within Australian society which has encompassed the reiteration that Australia is a tolerant and multicultural society. Moreover, it has been argued that the vestiges of racism that exist do so amongst only a small minority of the older Anglo-Australians, and that attitudes such as theirs are increasingly reprehensible in the eyes of the majority of Australians (Dugan and Szwarc, 1984). However, a number of factors have combined to raise serious questions about the legitimacy of this perception and to throw into relief its social role - that is, it has been increasingly revealed as ideology. The most important of these factors has been what has become known as "The Great Immigration Debate", triggered by the statements in March 1984 by Geoffrey Blainey, Professor of History at Melbourne University, as to the dangers of any overly rapid "Asianization" of Australia (Blainey, 1984; Singer, 1984; Milne and Shergold, 1984; Markus and Rickleff, 1985; *Migration Action* VII, 2, 1984; *Arena* No. 67, 1985.).

This essay surveys the process through which multiculturalism came to prominence as a social programme, and analyses the dynamics of its current rather more shaky dominance of cultural and inter-group relations. I begin by outlining the controversial elements in the debate underlying the political economy of immigration to Australia, a controversy which is reflected elsewhere in the discussion of

multiculturalism, economic crisis and most importantly the nature of racism. The essay concentrates on immigration, but refers to the implications of anti-racist struggles by the Aboriginal people to demonstrate the role of racism in contemporary Australian capitalism.

The political economy of migration

The long post-war boom in Australia was fuelled by the importation of labour and capital from overseas. The effects of this dependence on the Australian economy have been widely debated. Mainstream economists, both Keynesian and libertarian, have generally held that the benefits of this process outweighed the negative impacts. This view suggests that labour importation has increased net domestic demand, thus leading to increased capital investment and production. The increased work force also unblocked the bottlenecks in production after the war, and probably played a role in reducing the bargaining power of labour and therefore the overall pressure on wages. This in itself allowed more of a flow of value to profits, which increased the domestic capital stock (Douglas, 1982).

By the mid-1970s, under the influence of the work of European Marxists such as Castles and Kosack (1973), Australian Marxists had begun a detailed critique of the orthodox conception of the benefits of immigration. Jock Collins argued that immigration had the major effect of stratifying the Australian labour force, so that a dual labour market effectively operated. The secondary market was characterised by lower paid, less secure and dirty jobs, and was filled with non English speaking immigrants, along with some women and young people. There were political and economic benefits to the Australian ruling class from these processes. While an Anglo-Australian "labour aristocracy"

had been able to emerge as a result of the ethnic specification of lower level jobs, its class perception was blinkered by the cultural distance between workers (Collins, 1975, 1978, 1984).

Collins' argument has been addressed by Constance Lever Tracy who, while accepting some of Collins' descriptions of the situation seeks to demonstrate that immigrant workers are at the heart of Australian capitalism, and are therefore not as marginalised and dispensable as Collins' view might imply (Lever Tracy, 1981a, 1981b). More recently Lever Tracy has concluded that the greater alienation experienced by immigrant workers may bring about "greater resistance to ideological incorporation and compromise" (Lever Tracy, 1984: 142).

These Marxian analyses locate racism as an ideology utilised by the ruling class to maintain intra working-class fragmentation, and thus prevent more cohesive responses across class (and gender) boundaries (Collins, 1984: 13). These general views are contested by Bob Birrell, an active environmentalist and an opponent of large-scale immigration. He suggests that the continuation of immigration is the outcome of the development of the effective political lobby by the emerging ethnic middle class, linking with the bureaucratic desire for organisational aggrandisement demonstrated by the Federal Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. Birrell concludes that continued large-scale immigration is against the interests both of Australian capitalists and the working class. The bourgeoisie has seemed, however, to have lost control of the decision-making processes, with disastrous economic and ecological consequences for Australian society (Birrell and Birrell, 1981; Birrell, Hill and Nevill, 1984; Birrell, 1984).

More recently there has also emerged a number of economic arguments in favour of major increases in immigration. The most ardent proponent of this view has been John Elliott, secretary of the Victorian branch of the Liberal

Party and the chairman of an Australian-based multinational corporation. Elliott suggests an increase in immigration to 250,000 per annum (from the current 70,000) and ties Australia's economic problems to the cut back in immigration introduced by the Labor Party in the early 1970s (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 September 1984). While not presenting such an ambitious projection, a recent government-sponsored study has argued that overall, immigration has continued to exert a generally favourable economic impact on Australia, though the benefits have been declining. Indeed the authors could find no valid economic argument for limiting or further restricting immigration, even in times of substantial unemployment (*The Age*, 2 August 1984; Norman, 1984).

The economic issues had been given heightened importance by the rapid increase in unemployment, and the apparently higher proportion of the immigrant intake who were of Asian appearance (e.g. Chinese, Vietnamese, Khmer, Lao). It was within this context of increasing economic insecurity and the period of a quite conservative social democratic Labor Government in early 1984 that Blainey, as the voice of the little Australian, expressed on their behalf the "realistic concern felt by so many" about the apparent overwhelming increase in the numbers of Asian faces. The economic implications were that the refugees and their sponsored families not only took jobs from Australians, but that they were a heavy drain on Social Security as they experienced a very high (33 percent plus) unemployment rate themselves. During a period in which a Social Contract "The Accord" was being introduced, the importance of government being seen to be concerned about job security cannot be denied. Yet it was precisely a period when working-class cohesion would have been most threatening to the interests of a capitalist class intent on introducing labour-shedding technologies, and having access to a sluicing through of new malleable and desperate workers. An explanation of the crisis in terms of race categories, the legitimation of the naturalness of such categories, and the anger and tension

ostensibly being created in working-class areas by the "new" migrants, were the elements that underpinned the Blainey position. For Blainey, in order to resist the drive towards an unacceptable Asian "invasion" or takeover, a vital step was to reject the concept of multiculturalism and reassert the core values of the Anglo-Saxon founding fathers of Australia (Blainey, 1984:55).

Multiculturalism

The concept of multiculturalism was imported into Australia from Canada in the early 1970s. Its introduction owed a great deal to the work of American social scientists investigating what they saw as the tensions between *cultural* and *structural* pluralism in the Americas in the wake of Quebecois nationalism and black and Chicano separatist aspirations. The development of state policies guaranteed elements of cultural autonomy could be traded for specific allegiance to the core values of the state and society. By the early 1970s "multicultural" was entering common discourse within the fields of immigration and ethnic affairs, (Grassby, 1973) and was the preferred establishment alternative to the threatening possibility of a multiracial Australia (Jakubowicz et al., 1984: 35-55). The social democratic Labor Government of 1972-5 cut back the flow of immigrants, finally removed most of the remaining racial limiters to immigration, and began to focus attention on the millions of post war immigrants who had become permanent settlers.

By 1975 citizenship status had become far easier to achieve, and this resulted in the enfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of non-British immigrants. A series of programmes were drafted, and some tentative steps taken to respond to the rising call for ethnic rights (Storer et al., 1975). These steps included the expansion of central government grants to ethnic groups to employ welfare workers, the beginning of state-funded radio broadcasting in ethnic languages, a multicultural education programme, and a concerted effort to expose the problems that thirty years of migration had exacerbated. In particular the government began

to differentiate between migrant workers and the migrant middle class in its programmes.

The victory of the conservative Liberal/Country (National) Party coalition in 1975 changed the tensions but not the directions involved in the multicultural programme.

The conservative strategy sought to deny the class issues at stake, and publicly concentrate on the erosion of inequalities apparently linked to immigrant and ethnic status. The most significant ideological thrust under the conservative Canberra government was that contained in the Galbally Report, named after the chairman of the Committee of Review of Post Arrival Programs and Services for Migrants (Galbally, 1978). The Report institutionalised a residual neo-conservative view of welfare and rights, avoiding specific reference to issues of racism in Australian society. Indeed the period of conservative rule found a great deal of difficulty with the notion of racial antagonism, preferring to use words such as "intolerance", though at the same time accepting the delimiters implicit in the concept of race (e.g. see Barker, 1981; de Lepervanche, 1984: 49-55). Thereafter the usage of "multiculturalism" as a descriptive term became increasingly overshadowed by the ideological and political debate over the implications of different prescriptive and policy usages. One significantly unexplored issue was that of "culture" - clearly, many of the minorities shared quite basic orientations to institutions such as the market economy, while expressing strong differences elsewhere. Most were strongly affected with international cultural experiences transmitted through television, cinema etc. By the 1980s, most had undergone a process which was not simply that of transmigration. Urbanisation and proletarianisation were also centrally shared elements in the migration experience.

The development of state institutions was specifically towards the unique in this cultural transition, towards those things which differentiated immigrants, group from group. Thus intra-communal tensions across class or gender boundaries had little if any place upon

the multicultural agenda. Careful reading of the many government documents of the period reveals a concern that social mobility *within* the existing class and power structure should not be ethnically marked.

A series of reports and papers prepared for the Liberal government under the influence of conservative sociologist J. Zubrzycki of the Australian National University demonstrated the influence of American social stratification theorists in their specification of the main problems of a "multicultural" society. The central issues of maintaining a cohesive "whole" in the face of the cultural diversity generated by immigrants from over seventy nations, ensuring that cultural distinctiveness should not prevent social mobility, securing the right to sustain historic cultural behaviours at no penalty, were formulated as statements as to the essential requirements for a successful multicultural society (ACPEA, 1982: 12ff.).

Questions were not raised about whether the ladder to which the minorities should have access was fundamentally unequal, class biased and oppressive of women. The concept of social class used was one which transformed the tension inherent in the materialist use of the term into a bland occupational status achievement model of society - thereby bypassing and missing the issue of class *relations*. However this generally conservative position gained widespread though not totally uncritical support during the late 1970s and early 1980s, as central government funding was tied to an acceptance of the boundaries of this discourse.

There was a significant outpouring of academic and related studies, few of which examined issues of racism or sought to explain the material basis of inter-group hostility. Thus a major study on the experience of young Indo-Chinese refugees in the education system did not suggest racism as a factor for consideration in assessing the process of adjustment of the children (Spearritt and Colman, 1983).

Some critics have argued that it was the specific and continuing project of "multiculturalism"

under the conservative regime to mask the class conflict within those areas of Australian society, and develop a particularly cohesive Australian nationalism which had as its outcome the evisceration of the organisational strength of the working class. In particular, it was suggested that the ethnic petite bourgeoisie was increasingly supported by the state to maintain control of their own working-class elements (e.g. Kakakios and van der Velden, 1984, on the Greeks; Jakubowicz, 1983 and Jakubowicz et al. 1984 on the Italian communities).

One of the apparent paradoxes concerning multiculturalism, given its spread across both social democratic and neo-conservative agendas, has been the systematic attack upon the concept and its proponents from both populist and libertarian conservatives. Blainey and Birrell represent the former view - one which recognises the value of cultural diversity but rejects as sociologically impossible rapidly changing values, or a society in which conflict over core values does not result from culturally distinctive and physiognomically demarcated groups competing for scarce resources. Blainey's hagiography of the Australian soul is sustained by a belief that the ability to tolerate cultural diversity is a learnt and fragile capacity which could be easily fractured by too rough handling. Thus Blainey introduces a presentation in which the concepts of race and culture become interchangeable and interchanged, and effectively delivers into the Australian heartland an antipodean and populist variant of Enoch Powell's 1968 Rivers of Blood speech. Birrell queries whether "the major long term changes in Australia's racial make-up [sic]...have not been agreed upon, let alone even considered by most Australians" (Birrell, 1984: 84).

The libertarian conservatives have had the most considered of their arguments put by Frank Knopfmacher, an Eastern European refugee with a long history of anti-communist agitation. His perception of Australian society is one of meritocratic openness and mobility, a society unencumbered by the prejudices of class and status that bind Europe and Asia, woven around a free market. It is these values that are so

attractive to immigrants, Knopfelmacher suggests, and these conditions are best defended by maintaining British cultural and institutional values. Multiculturalism is thus either simply an overly complicated term for interpersonal respect, and the acceptance of the validity of retaining past traditions as assimilation naturally and less painfully occurs; or in his more conspiratorial arena, a device through which the possibilities of individual social mobility are held back by the machinations of a new bureaucratic class intent on categorising the world and then managing the results (Knopfelmacher, 1982). A rather deeper conspiracy is described by Lachlan Chipman, a philosopher, who has perceived within multiculturalism the hand of revolutionary Marxists seeking to manipulate the minds of the ethnic proletariat to their own nefarious ends (Chipman, 1981 a). The most important element in Chipman's concern is the specification of the dangers to individual liberty which apparently arise when the state defines an individual by his/her membership of a category - such as gender or an ethnic or racial group. Chipman asserts that benefits which flow to an individual thus categorised (e.g. affirmative action in employment) necessarily disadvantages those who are not members of the category (Chipman, 1980b). A variant of this argument suggests that multiculturalism has been created not in response to the demands of the mass of the ethnic communities, but as a vote catching exercise by the political parties who have been duped by multicultural industry activists (Sestito, 1982). This is a rather more crude position than is normally taken by the more sophisticated libertarians, though it provides a conceptual bridge, albeit a messy one, between the two conservative camps.

Racism and the immigration debate

The most important issue in the immigration debate is not the numbers of immigrants; but their source and the implications a significant change in street faces might have for the level of harmony and cohesion in the community. The use of racial categories is of particular

importance, as the mainstream proponents of restricted immigration disclaim they are racists. Rather they concentrate on cultural distinctiveness and the refusal by the new arrivals to assimilate into "the Australian way of life" (White, 1981:158ff.) However, in a society as historically diverse as Australia there are many people with Asian features whose families have been in the country since the mid-1800s. Thus it is the assumptions about behaviour that different facial characteristics are believed to imply that become all important. Here we see reflections of the arguments of the old White Australia advocates - "don't pollute our society" - mixing with the new conservative credo that culturally different groups can never live peacefully together, if they are to retain their rights to autonomous cultural expression.

Frank Campbell has shown that the intermingling of "race" and "culture" leads not to confusion, but to a situation where those with racial malice are provided with an ethnic or cultural mask to disguise their intentions - racism he suggests should be kept unrespectable. Australians should not, as the British tried to do, ignore their racism. Rather they should expose and harass it wherever it appears (Campbell, 1984).

Andrew Markus has noted that current immigration levels are hardly a fundamental problem for Australia, and yet the use by extremist groups of racist derogation to undermine social relationships has been given a significant boost by the common utilisation of race categories (Markus and Rickleff, 1985).

Racism and blacks

The debate over Asian immigration developed at the same time as a virulent exchange emerged over Aboriginal claims for land rights. Recent black-oriented histories such as those concerning the Northern Queensland (Reynolds, 1982) and the Centralian clans (which formed the Pitjantjatjara Land Council (Toyne and Vachon, 1984)) demonstrated the crucial importance that black Australians place on their ancestral lands. The demand for land

rights had been repressed for many years, in the wake of the European invasion and the attempted assimilation of Aborigines into a European society based on capitalist relations of production. A resurgence had developed in the 1960s after bubbling (quietly since the 1920s (Levy, 1983). However, as mining companies began to move on to land that had been seen previously as inhospitable by the Europeans, or suitable only for pastoral uses, Aboriginal resistance increased. In part the claim for rights was an attempt to regain control of territories taken without treaty or payment, and traditional ownership had to be shown in order to have access to royalties (Maddock, 1983). In other circumstances, the action was designed to prevent the despoliation of sacred sites.

There was growing and sustained resistance to these claims from mining interests, most loudly from Hugh Morgan of the Western Mining Corporation. He demanded a register of "real" Aborigines, vetted and attested to by anthropologists as to the legitimacy and proportion of their Aboriginal blood line (*The Australian*, 21 November 1984). The attack on Aboriginal land rights was conjoined by many right-wing groups with opposition to Asian immigration. These groups included the National Alliance, National Action, the National Front, elements of the Immigration Control Association and most effectively, by the League of Rights, an organisation with close links to the right wing of the National Party (Gott, 1965; Campbell, 1978; Green, 1984; Maguire, 1984). The important insight is the recognition that racism is being projected as an acceptable form of discourse, in the case of Aborigines to deny their political claims to economic power.

Racism and sexism

Many discussions of racism in Australia have been presented as gender free. However, as an increasing number of feminist scholars/activists have demonstrated, racism differentially affects men and women. Dianne Bell has charted the particular corrosive impact of white colonialism on the previously separate, distinct but equal

spheres of male and female life among the Centralian blacks near Warrabri (Bell, 1982, 1983). A major Australian feminist conference sought to take as its theme "Women and Racism" (Fourth Women and Labour Conference 1984), and managed to attract a range of papers concerning Aboriginal and immigrant women. A literary autobiography by a working-class Italian woman has appeared, to be attacked by the conservative forces in that community (Cappiello, 1984).

In trenchant critiques of mainstream government developments of multiculturalism, both Jeannie Martin and Liz Fell have indicated the gender blindness of many perspectives and the implications for women of the decisions taken (Fell, 1983; Martin, 1983, 1984). Gil Bottomley has also advanced a series of committed scholarly papers which have explored the experience of immigrant women, mainly Greeks, and the implications for them of the emergence of the women's movement, both in Australia and in their Mediterranean countries of origin (e.g. Bottomley, 1984). Lenore Manderson and Christine Inglis have taken particular care to distinguish between the experience of men and women workers amongst Turkish migrants in Sydney (Manderson and Inglis, 1984: 264-9). Moreover, the strategy of conservative groups to drive women back into traditional domestic roles has parallels with their use of racist categories of social description (cf. Sawyer, 1982).

National strategies against racism

The evidence of the performance by the Labor government on racism suggests that it had accepted many of the neo-conservative myths about the nature of social relations in Australia - namely that Australia had become sufficiently tolerant a society so that individual prejudice was a minor residual. The AIMA Evaluation of the settlement programme for immigrants released in 1982 made passing reference to racial intolerance, recommending as the sole action for government a commitment of \$600,000 for the production of "racial tolerance"

television advertisements (AIMA, 1982: 308). This general strategy was reinforced by the November 1983 release of the Labor government's statement of achievements (West, 1983). There was general acceptance of the AIMA strategy and a series of amendments made to remove discriminatory elements in the Immigration Act and Citizenship Act. However a strategy to combat racism was not even raised as an issue. One year later the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia called publicly for an upgrading of the government's strategy in what it claimed was the latter's very poor defence against the attacks by Blainey and the resurgent racist right (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 December 1984).

The focus on the national response has been through the Human Rights Commission, a body charged with administering the Racial Discrimination Act and the Sex Discrimination Act. The powers of the Commission are essentially to assess individual complaints, and to develop educational programmes. They have no blanket powers to combat racism, though these are under discussion.

At the state level, the response to racism has been varied. The Labor government in Victoria has used the Ethnic Affairs Commission to prepare a regular proactive campaign against racism, while the League of Rights has been particularly targeted for close scrutiny and attack with regard to the development of Aboriginal land rights in that state (Ethnic Affairs Commission of Victoria, 1984). The NSW Commission has released a series of Occasional Papers (e.g. Goot, 1984), while the state Anti Discrimination Board has used its powers to prosecute individual cases of racial discrimination. The working-class movement through the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the individual state branches (the Trades and Labour Councils) has developed policies firmly condemning racism, (e.g. ACTU, 1984 for ACTU statements and NSW TLC strategy against racism).

Conclusions

The debate over the control of immigration into Australia has developed the clear features associated with racially ascribed boundaries that are all too familiar from the experience of Britain and the United States. A social democratic government has designed a policy to reduce immigration during a period of high unemployment, and allow entry only to close relatives, special skill and self-supporting business categories. It has expanded the source but not the numbers of refugees, seeking them not only from state socialist regimes but also from neo-fascist states, particularly in Central and South America. The result of these choices has been to increase the likelihood that the family reunion category immigrants (the largest) will increasingly reflect the origins of the more recently arrived groups - those still in the family reunion process. In Australia that must mean more Asian - particularly Indo-Chinese - immigrants (especially from Vietnam in the wake of the "orderly departure" agreement with Hanoi). The government has decided to limit the inflow of Indo-Chinese by denying them the possibility of sibling sponsorship (in addition to parent-child sponsorship), a right given to non-Asian applicants.

The populist critique promulgated by Blainey et al looks to the "neighbourhoods" as the focus of the problem and seeks to speak on behalf of the Australian worker and defend him/her against the middle-class protagonists of a multicultural society. However, many critics from the Left demonstrate that the real problems lie with the crisis in Australian capitalism, and the processes of massive labour shedding attendant on its current reconstruction. They note the role racism is playing in diverting attention from the causes of unemployment to some of its results, and reflect on the potency of the British National Front in similar circumstances. A number of writers explore the way in which ethnicity transforms Australian class relations, and the particular implications of these transformations for the experience of black Australians. The increasing influence of feminist

analyses has put on notice perspectives blind to gender oppression, that they will not be able to claim any authority in the future if they remain blind.

In a manner which many Australian liberal intellectuals find decidedly uncomfortable, racism has resurfaced from its shallow resting place in the back blocks and among the fringe groups. The resurgence of racially demarcated discourse indicates that the economic reconstruction of Australia and the persistence of chronic unemployment will be given form along lines of racial and ethnic cleavage. The central state strategy to proclaim a nationalist unity will not necessarily overcome those tendencies, for they will continue to deny the material tensions between classes. On 6 December 1984 the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported the fire bombing and destruction of a factory which was said to employ Asians in preference to "Australians". The group claiming responsibility called itself the Australian Party Against Asians.

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