

This is an extract from a Paper presented at the Conference on "Human Biology an Integrative Science", Perth, December 1990, in which the author analyses the theoretical and historical significance of different representations of racism in Australia.

[Prof Jayasuriya notes that "recurrent racist episodes epitomised by the recent conviction of Van Tongeren for wanton acts of racial violence against Aboriginal, Jewish & Asian groups" appear to confirm views that racism is deeply entrenched in our society. After examining the various theories of race, racialism and racism, he shows that Australian racism had its origins in the "anglo-racism" of colonial capitalism and was characterized by a strong perceived correlation and alleged inferiority, and was increasingly linked with immigration and Australian nationalism.

"Old racism", originating from the mid-19th century in Australia was transported from Britain & Europe to Australia, and exemplified 19th century pseudo-scientific doctrines of racism. These doctrines of racism were used to justify wholesale destruction of Aboriginal societies in colonial countries, and also underlay anti-Asian prejudices in the U S A & Australia. The growing reliance on immigrant labour in later 19th century Australia was accompanied by a virulent anti-Asian, anti-Melanesian and even anti-Southern European racism. Immigration became increasingly the centre piece of thinking about race relations, with both labour & conservative parties adopting strident forms of racism, such as the notorious White Australia Policy. Until 1945 a rigid policy of racial homogeneity, justified by reference to nation-building, was immigration policy. But new forces were emerging. And this "old racism" gave way to new forms of racist thinking in the latter half of the 20th century].

The 19th century racism, so characteristic of Australian racism, or to use Barker's term, 'old racism', was based on exclusion on biological grounds. This form of racism was

Racism and Immigration in Australia:

New expressions of Racism

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fast becoming obsolete and repugnant to intellectuals, conservatives, politicians and the growing middle class in Australia, all of whom wished to distance themselves from the horrors of Nazi racism which had obvious links with 'old racism'. As the very intellectual foundations of 'scientific racism' were discredited, other historical and political events too began to weaken the influence of this old racial ideology. The growing dominance of Japan in the world economy, the decline of colonial imperialism and the emergence of new Asian nations, and the influx of post-war immigrants challenged prevailing theories of racial ideology, and destroyed the credibility of old fashioned racism.

A particularly important factor was the new ideology of multiculturalism, in reality a philosophy of cultural pluralism, which for political and pragmatic reasons, replaced the orthodoxy of assimilationist thinking which had been a cornerstone of migrant settlement. Clearly, the incorporation of the migrants into existing social and political institutions could not be on the basis of previous anglo-centered racial ideologies. Ethnicity and its cognate notions of identity became central elements of multiculturalism which installed the concept of 'culture' as the unproblematic centre piece of this new policy perspective. In brief, the language of 'racial' differences was now re-

placed by that of 'cultural' differences.

It was against this background that, not surprisingly, in 1972 the 'White Australia' policy, aptly described as one of the 'sacred cows' of Australian capitalism (ensuring a tight labour market), was expunged from the statute book. In part this bold reform, introduced by the Whitlam government, was intended to remove the moral taint of racism; and was also partly a neighbourly gesture towards some of Australia's most important trading partners. Whatever the motives for this change and assessment of its success as a policy, these far reaching social and political changes heralded the demise of 'old racism', at least overtly. There is no doubt that the sentiments of racism associated with these conventional ideologies still persist in the popular consciousness and finds convenient outlets of expression in fringe groups, but they no longer are accorded any degree of credibility in public discourse...

As in Britain, where similar changes were taking place, the definition of racism began to be revised and reformulated. The ideology of racism began to take on a different form, and expressed in a new language and terminology. More central to this ideology of 'new racism' than the concept of culture was that of 'nation' [for] in this new language of racist discourse, racism and national-

ism are inextricably interwoven. The use of the concept of the nation, as a means of demarcating the boundaries of acceptance and rejection of group membership is exemplified in the recently expressed conservative ideology of a One Australia recently espoused by John Howard of the Liberal Party. This extols in a more acceptable language, the sentiments of a strident nationalism and provides a kind of moral justification for the need for racial exclusion by identifying those who do not belong to the nation.

Racial exclusions or immigration restrictions are no longer justified in terms of racial inferiority. Instead this 'new racism' is more keen to distinguish between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' on a variety of grounds such as those of social acceptability and desirable cultural characteristics. The point is that difference is not constructed in racial or biological terms, but as group norms and group attitudes. It is the way in which the 'Other' is constituted that distinguishes the old from the new racism.

The plea for social harmony, increasingly voiced by critics of multiculturalism, such as Blainey, Ruxton and others is in effect a means of affirming the traditional values of the nation state as expressed by the dominant groups. It is equally an expression of the need for aliens, newcomers to conform to the values, ethos and social norms of the 'nation'. Viewed in these terms the antagonism against 'Asians' is largely because they are seen to be acting contrary to the ethos and values of the nation, the national culture, to Australian values and norms, such as egalitarianism, and by working too hard, and seeking rapid advancement.

The racist argument is now stated primarily though not exclusively in terms of the language of 'social cohesion' and 'national unity', and becomes linked with xenophobic nationalism. As Parekh has noted, in almost all European countries (and Australia is no exception) 'racism' has entered a new phase and taken

'the form of a plea for the identity and respect for the rights of the majority' (Parekh 1987 : 99), where "ethnic minorities are no longer viewed as being inferior, rather that their presence poses a threat to the cultural integrity of the indigenous community.. "(Parekh : 99).

It is this link between national identity that is central to 'new racism', and increasingly evident in Australian racism. Nationalism is no longer a matter of white superiority, but one of cultural uniqueness.

The origins of racism in Australian society, as an 'anglo-fragment' society, lie firmly embedded in the ideology of British racism. This 'anglo-racism' over the last hundred years has evolved in the context of ever present political needs in Australian society, especially the need for economic security and protection of a new and developing society. Despite the obvious fact that attitudes of the new settlers to the native, indigenous Aboriginal people, were a key element in fashioning Australian racism, it is the imperatives of immigration policy, the need to establish criteria of inclusion/exclusion, which has nurtured and sustained Australian racism.

In tracing this process of development, we have endeavoured to demonstrate the intrinsic connection that exists between immigration policies and attitudes to migrant settlement and expressions of racism in Australia. For a variety of reasons, the 'old racism' of the 19th century, steeped in the language of scientific racism' and doctrines of biological inequality has been discarded. And in its place, we have emerging a 'new racism' extolling the virtues of distinctive cultural values and the sense of a 'nation'. This new ideology of racism appears more respectable and acceptable because it is framed in the language of the inevitability of cultural difference, pointing to the fact that differences between national groups are normal and natural. . .

And we might add, continues to be so. Clearly, the on-going debate in Australian society about immigra-

tion as it has developed in the media and through the various anti-Asian lobby groups about racism is, among other things, about this 'new racism'. We are witnessing a new language of public discourse and an ideology of racism, the manifestations of which are likely to be radically different from those of the past, and may have far-reaching social implications.

Suggested reading on racism

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