Understanding Australian Racism

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Racism entered the Australian public consciousness only as recently as the early 1970s. A notable landmark document in this regard is Stevens' (1971) pathbreaking three-volume study of Australian racism, which was a major turning point in generating an increased awareness of the nature of racism and developing a scholarly understanding of the expression of racism in Australian society. Regrettably, over nearly three decades there has been little progress. The review of the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) in 1995 makes pointed reference to the paucity of thinking about race and racism in Australia, in particular the absence of 'sophisticated theorization of racial discrimination' (Antonios 1995).

Thornton (1995), Pritchard (1995) and others have made special reference to the fact that racism is not just a matter of 'individual prejudice in everyday practice', but a phenomenon deeply embedded in language and perception as 'an inseparable and ubiquitous feature of modern societies'. In confronting the undeniable reality of racism, we need to remind ourselves that 'racism, as an ideology is deeply embedded in the structures of Australian society' (Encel 1971). A prior task, however, is to generate 'an understanding of the concept of racism or its … range of possible meanings' (Markus 2001). Therefore, any public discussion of racism must begin with an exposition of the nature and character of racism in contemporary Australian society.

'Race' itself is a social construct, a category of classification in terms of inheritable characteristics (e.g., physical features, descent/blood, etc.) and/or other social characteristics. What is important in this social categorization is that the distinct characteristics, attributes, and qualities used to define a racial category are presumed to influence behaviour and attitudes such as in racial stereotypes. As a consequence, the racialised groups are positively/negatively evaluated and/or subject to unequal treatment. In other words, the race construct depicts the underlying social reality of a group labelled and perceived as a racial group. From this perspective, racism needs to be understood in terms of how we construct this category of 'race'. Race and racism go hand in hand.

Racism is not just a question of group characteristics, stereotypes, or inter-group relations, but a question of ideology (Castles and Vasta 1996; Miles 1989). This refers mainly to the social meanings attached to racialised groups, by others – the dominant groups. It is this racist ideology that gives meaning to *differences* – be they those based on inheritable characteristics or a distinctive culture – in the way we act, think and feel, i.e., individual behaviour and/or racist attitudes. Stated differently, genetically inherited or culturally based differences are seen to contribute to a range of behaviours, some desirable, others undesirable. What is more, this ideology is also embodied and reflected in a range of social institutions, public policies and practices, all of which are manifest as different forms of racism: individual, institutional or cultural (Sivananda 2002).

In the era of European colonial expansion of the nineteenth century, the racist ideology born of 'scientific racism' and social darwinism, was closely linked with an 'aristocracy of nature' which gave legitimacy to the imperial powers (Bulmer & Solomos 1999). No wonder then, that the British Empire was built on the inherent right of Englishmen to rule. In these instances, where race is employed to exclude or set apart racialised groups, the emphasis is placed on *inequality*, of superiority/inferiority. In more recent times, the classic example of this kind of racist discourse was Apartheid in South Africa or racist segregation in the United States. It is important to acknowledge that this form of racism, and its socio-political underpinnings, represents *one* major form of racism, in modern societies. It was this kind of racism, associated with social darwinism, which was, perhaps, the dominant feature of the formative period of western industrial capitalism and colonisation in the nineteenth century.

But, as several theorists, e.g., Taguieff (1990), Wieviorka (1995), and Sivananda (2002) have recently pointed out, there is more than one kind of racism. These theorists have made an important contribution to our understanding of racism by making a distinction between two forms of the logic of racism, each having its own form of discourse and particular manifestations. One form of racial logic is the widely known 'old racism', wherein the *logic of inferiorisation*, of inequality and discrimination, is based on the now discredited grounds of inherited biological differences.

The other, though less well identified kind of racism is reliant on the *logic of differentiation*, one which seeks to exclude and set apart racialised groups from others on the grounds of cultural difference (e.g., of common national origin or descent, myths and symbolic and distinctive identity as a 'people' or nation). In this form of racism, the

accent is 'on the massacre, exploitation and negation of the Other' (Wieviorka 1995). Markus refers to this as 'cultural racism' since its dominant theme is 'the insurmountability of cultural differences' (Markus 2001). Not surprisingly, the dislike of 'foreigners' or 'fear of strangers' was considered a natural human trait by many sociologists. Natural selection, it was argued, acted on individuals to enhance mechanisms of group identification which in turn augmented 'the (real and perceived) superiority of the group with which they identified' (Hinde, quoted in Smith 1992). The net result of this was that it gave legitimacy to discriminatory policies of immigration.

A good example of this sort of racism is that of German racism, which puts the emphasis on a common tribal origin, a unity of descent, *(ius sanguinis)*, based on a distinctive cultural heritage. This rejection of outsiders on the grounds of alien cultural ancestry is also evident in aspects of British racism that were transplanted into the Australian folk psyche as a part of Australia's British heritage. Hence, the clarion call of those like Henry Parkes at the time of Federation in 1901, that nation building was predicated on *One Nation, One Destiny*, a leitmotif adopted later on by advocates of *One Australia* (John Howard) and *One Nation* (Pauline Hanson). The notion of a common culture, nay, a unique and distinctive culture which was Australian, was inextricably interwoven into the definition of a nation. This serves to explain the intimate link between racism and nationalism in the policy of racial exclusion (IR Act of 1901) formulated at the founding of Federation in the nineteenth century (Jayasuriya 2000). Invariably, racial and cultural homogeneity became the basis of national unity and identity and was regarded as the essence of the 'imaginary nation'.

In the contemporary Australian context, we therefore, need to recognise that there is no single racism (Castles and Vasta 1997). What we have are two basic logics of racism: inferiority and inequality (prejudice and discrimination) and differentiation (exclusion). In other words, racism cannot be reduced to questions of either biological or cultural difference. In Australia and elsewhere, these two logics always co-exist - but usually, depending on the specific historical and socio-political context, one form of logic prevails or is dominant. What this means is that 'race' and racism are dynamic and constantly changing concepts. Though racism is embedded in the structures of society, its manifestations are influenced by historical and socio-political factors. For these reasons, racism is pre-eminently a social phenomenon, which exists irrespective of individuals and their behaviour, attitudes and feelings.

To unravel the social reality of 'race' and racism as an ideology, we need to examine how the two logics of racism have evolved over time in Australia (Jaysuriya 2000). In this regard, what is most significant is to understand that Australian racism throughout its colonial history in the nineteenth century, was based pre-eminently, but not exclusively, on the logic of inferiority and inequality. This racism, exemplified in the oppression and harassment of the Aboriginal people, the First Australians, also came to exist alongside a strident nationalism, vividly reflected in the official policies of racial exclusion, the infamous 'White Australia' policy (Jayasuriya et al. 2002).

Accordingly, the political justification of a 'White Australia', one of the first acts of Federation, was made not so much on the grounds of racial inferiority, but rather the incompatibility of non-white settlers (compare the ambivalent attitude towards the Japanese at this time), especially Asian races, with the dominant cultural heritage of a British Australia. With the *Immigration Reform Act* of 1901, Australia 'preserved its conception of national identity by legislation which discriminated against those who … did not fit into the imagined community' (Jordens 1992). The purity of an 'unmixed nation', expressed as racial and cultural homogeneity, was seen as the indispensable condition of national unity and social cohesion (Jayasuriya 1999, 2000).

The two forms of racism - inferiority and differentiation - prevailed for nearly seven decades in varying combinations before these policies of discrimination and exclusion on the grounds of 'race' were discarded, at least, *de jure*, in the 1970s (Kelly 2001; Markus 2001). The changes that occurred in the early 1970s during the reformist Whitlam era were no doubt a direct consequence of post-World War II mass immigration that changed the social, economic, and political landscape of Australia in the latter half of the twentieth century. As a result of the formal removal of institutional barriers to discrimination and exclusion (e.g., immigration reform and the RDA of 1975), Australia became a more open society, and also a less racist society. At the same time, the discredited old notion of 'race', as an essentially biological concept was discarded and replaced by the more acceptable notions of culture, ethnicity, and cultural distinctiveness. For some, ethnicity - that is, one's identification with a cultural group - became the more inclusive term incorporating 'race'; so much so that 'race' became a taboo word for the new liberal political ideology of multiculturalism that evolved in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, in Britain Margaret Thatcher referred to the fear of native Britain being 'swamped by people (e.g., from the New Commonwealth and Pakistan) with different cultures'. Here, '"race" is coded as culture [with] no reference to claims of biology or superiority' (Goldberg 1992).

Similarly, in Australia, with the official promotion of multiculturalism as a social ideal since the 1970s, the language of racial or inherited difference was generally replaced by cultural difference and cultural distinctiveness (Lopez 2001). Although sentiments associated with 'race' and racial

ideology, based on 'old racism' continued to persist in the popular consciousness, it was soon to be overtaken by the 'new racism' (Parekh 1987; Jayasuriya & Kee 1999). As in other Western countries (such as Britain and France), in Australia too this form of racism had existed alongside the 'old racism', but, over time, this 'new racism', associated with racial exclusion, has come to be more dominant than the 'old racism', characterised by racial inferiority and discrimination. Properly understood, the concept of 'race' embodied in 'new racism', is not a monolithic concept, but really a *process* - one of 'radicalisation' whereby socially significant groups, be they Aboriginal, Asians or non-Europeans, are regarded as 'nationally constituted populations of unequal merit' (Cole 1997).

Thus, the new language of a strident Australian nationalism (Markus 2001), without resorting to the use of racial descriptions and evaluations, extols the need for exclusion in a more acceptable language (for instance, of desirable values and moral qualities such as social cohesion, unity and universalism). This ideology provides a kind of moral justification of exclusion by identifying through a process of racialisation (for example, asylum seekers from countries where Islam is the main religion) those who do not belong to the nation. Thus, ethnic minorities, Indigenous and non-Indigenous are no longer viewed as being inferior, rather they are seen as a threat to the cultural integrity of the dominant culture. Through this process of constructing a nation - an 'imagined community' with a shared culture - those groups that are not seen to be a part of the 'nation' are excluded or marginalised. Belonging - the passport to full entry into the nation - is conditional on total or partial assimilation viewed as accepting core cultural values, all derived from the Anglo-Celtic inheritance.

What is central to the 'new racism', which has emerged in the past few decades not only in Australia but also in several western countries (cf. the National Front in the UK or Le Pen's group in France), are the concepts of *culture* and *nation*. Exclusion, as in matters of immigration policy, is no longer justified in terms of 'race', but on a variety of grounds such as the non-possession of desirable cultural characteristics and/or lack of social acceptability such as language, religion, or other personal attributes. Accordingly, for One Nation in Australia, the acid test of inclusion, of being a good Australian, is cultural compatibility. The culturally different, that is, those who do not subscribe to norms and values dictated by the dominant culture, have become the outsiders who are alien to the 'nation' (McNamara 1998).

This strident nationalism which breeds exclusion generates a form of racism identified as *Xeno-racism* (Fekete 2001) or, a xenophobia understood as the 'fear of strangers' which is essentially charged with a passionate defence of 'our way of life'. For this reason, the ability to speak English - not the Queen's English but the colloquial Aussie English - becomes a prime indicator or acceptability signifying cultural assimilation. Likewise, those of 'Judeo-Christian cultural background' (Stone 2002) have better credentials for being admitted and accepted as belonging to the 'nation'. This underlies the exclusion and rejection of, and often concealed hostility to, those from Muslim/Islamic origin on the grounds of religion. There is no doubt that the limits of the secular democratic state are drawn within discretely hidden impermeable boundaries of preferred cultural values, the mystical core cultural values, applauded by theorists such as Dixon (1999), Hirst (2001), and others.

Not surprisingly, this mode of thinking as well as the negative social attitudes towards 'difference' is characteristic of the critics of multiculturalism and immigration, especially among neo-assimilationists. These critics - not only in political lobby groups, but also in academia - who exaggerate the worth and value of cultural difference and national heritage, have sought to exploit to their own advantage, the humane and liberal values of multiculturalism, such as the respect for, and tolerance of, difference. In this process, they have sought to privilege certain cultural values (such as mateship and tolerance) as being natural, more desirable and essential for nation-building (cf. Jayasuriya 1999 on the Constitutional Preamble). This political ideology presents a radical re-interpretation of the 'right to be different' such that the racist argument is expressed primarily, though not exclusively, on the grounds of 'social cohesion' and 'national unity'; hence, the priority accorded to the *cultural nation*, the cultural values of the dominant groups (Jayasuriya 2001)

This 'new racism', in short, has cleverly turned on its head the liberal policies of multiculturalism and cultural pluralism which emerged in the 1970s, so much so that, ironically the new racists argue that the disrespect of difference is the hallmark of racism. This new ideology of racism, emphasising the cultural distinctiveness of the majority groups, makes the host culture appear more respectable and acceptable because it is framed in the language of the inevitability and intrinsic value of cultural difference. Consequently, these attitudes to 'difference' leads the new racists to differentiate sharply between groups, i.e., 'in' or 'out' groups – 'them' and 'us' – on cultural grounds. This is the crux of the 'new assimilationism' (Hirst 2001), demanding acceptance of core cultural values as the defining criteria of 'Australianness', of belonging. In other words, this is what justifies the claim that Australian identity resides in the core anglo-celtic culture (Dixon 1999).

In short, then, the logic of inferiority and inequality that characterised the first half of the twentieth century has now become subordinate to the *logic of differentiations*. Prejudice, discrimination and exclusion are no longer a matter of racial inferiority but of cultural difference. The

spokespersons of racism, of the Left and Right, are clearly exponents of this 'new racism' which extols the virtues of national unity and social cohesion and also regards being an 'Australian' as subscribing to a mythical core culture. This is highly reminiscent of the confounding of *culture*, *race*, and *nation* at the time of Federation (McQueen 1986) except for the fact that the new nationalism of contemporary Australia is no longer linked to white superiority or racial homogeneity.

National identity is now more a matter of affirming cultural distinctiveness or uniqueness; the marks of being a good Aussie requires 'the development of an independent Australian identity' (Crisp 1989). Clearly, the ideas of nation and nationalism have become a 'coded vicarious discussion of race' (Husband 1987), and as in 1901, racism has emerged as 'the most important single component of Australian nationalism' (McQueen 1986). One of the major barriers to dealing with these new expressions of racism is the way in which we have constructed a multicultural discourse that officially denies racism, and ideologically espouses the liberal values of tolerance and racial equality. The language of *Australian* multiculturalism, promoted in the NMAC Report (NMAC 1999) with the use of the prefix 'Australian', was to accommodate John Howard who was previously reluctant to use the 'M' word. This new language avoids confronting 'race' and racism by maintaining that racism is officially sanctioned as socially unacceptable. This discourse, clearly evident in the NMAC Report, resorts to a depoliticised culturalist language that masks the reality of the two basic logics of racism - inequality and discrimination - and the social political reality of 'difference'.

Put simply, the understanding of racism in contemporary Australian society is severely flawed if it persists in the *denial* of racism such as in the new language of public discourse (for instance, the use of the concept of 'integration' being absorbed into the Australian inheritance and cultural heritage as a way of obliterating the 'cultural divide' (*The Weekend Australian* 2002). The simple fact is that Australia is *two* societies (Sivanandan quoted in Bird 1995) – one multicultural and the other racist. This substantiates and reinforces the disjunction between the multicultural and Aboriginal discourse (Curthoys 1999) evident in theorising about Australian multiculturalism. Thus, the most recent official statement on multiculturalism by the Howard government (NMAC 1999), despite its formal commitment to tolerance and diversity, fails to acknowledge and confront the reality of 'race' and racism and the complexity of racist discourse - that there is no single racism, nor a single black-white divide.

Furthermore, the new language of public policy discourse, demonising 'refugees' and asylum-seekers as 'illegal immigrants' threatening national security has created an additional dimension to Australian racism as *xeno-racism* — a subset of 'new racism'. What is important about xeno-racism is that it is a form of *state racism* where the state has intervened with its full force calling on all its structure, institutions, and bureaucracy to combat the threat to the security of the state. In combatting this new expression of racism, as xeno-racism, we have to contend with *state racism*, manifest in asylum laws, mandatory detention, deaths in custody and so on.

This complex racist ideology must be understood as a multifaceted dynamic which is constantly changing and marked by many forms and different expressions of racism. Above all, it is an ideology interacting with the cross-cutting reality of class and gender relations. Stated differently, the multicultural discourse and its practice in reality needs to confront difference and its various manifestations, gendered and class based, honestly and equitably. This is a pre-requisite to understanding the commonalities of discrimination and exclusion impinging on excluded groups – be they Aboriginal Australians or other Australians of immigrant origin, especially non-Caucasians.

However, to confront the racism of contemporary Australian society we need, as a matter of priority to develop 'a constructive politics of opposition' (McNamara 1998) to expose the falsity and dishonesty of the distorted logic and rationale of 'new racism'. In addition, this makes it imperative that we reconstruct the prevailing multicultural discourse in a manner that it is able to incorporate the needs and political aspirations of the indigenous minorities – the First Australians. To remove the disjunction between the Aboriginal discourse and the multicultural consciousness, as I have argued elsewhere (Jayasuriya 1991, 2001), requires that we move away from the cultural to the political nation as the basis of a pluralistic integration and social cohesion. To this end, we need to refine the politics of universalism to incorporate the politics of difference by underpinning the moral basis of a diverse and plural society with institutional support structures and securing its legitimacy on a formal statutory and constitutional basis (Jayasuriya 2002).

The challenge we confront in combatting contemporary forms of racism is first and foremost to devise 'political forms best suited to a condition of society marked by substantial diversity (Gray 1996). This can only be gained by a pluralistic citizenship expressed in statutory form via a Bill of Rights or Australian Charter of Rights (Jayasuriya 2001, 2002). One hundred years ago, the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901 inscribed a form of racism that we have overcome with great political skill and courage. But, have we the courage as a mature, independent liberal democracy to go forward and build on our achievements by inscribing a new Act that will enshrine the democratic values of justice and equality befitting a genuinely plural society?

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