

## Culture as the New Racism

*Laksiri Jaysuriya*

'Race' and 'Racism' it seems – much to the consternation of the Prime Minister – has become issues of public debate after the Cronulla riots. But it is the denial of racism that is a feature of public debate. Surely it is time we had a real conversation and debate about racism. But to do this we need to understand the precise way in which this racism is manifested as 'culture talk' in Australian social life. This is essential because we need to understand that racism can take on different hues and its current manifestation may be very different from that which existed at the turn of the century. Let me explain.

One form of racism is the 'old racism' associated with the now discredited grounds of inherited biological (biological racism). This had its own language of discourse and spelt out its own logic of inferiority/superiority as in the racist discourse of South African apartheid or racial segregation in the US. As against this 'old racism' there exists another kind of racism. This places emphasis on the 'cultural' differences between groups perceived as racial groups. This conjunction of race and culture, when confined within territorial boundaries of a nation state, serves to highlight how one's cultural heritage and ancestry, and becomes the basis for the constitution of the political community.

This conflation of race, culture and nation has a long history in Australia. At the time of Federation we witnessed a powerful push for what Sir Henry Parkes described as 'One Nation, One Destiny' - a plea for *racial* and *cultural* unity or homogeneity as the basis of national unity or identity. This was the bedrock of Australian public policy for over half a century and embodied both types of racism—of inferiority and exclusion— which have persisted to this day.

From 1970 onwards, these new policy strategies labeled, as 'multiculturalism'— directed primarily towards the effective integration of new settlers into Australian society—led to the removal of institutional barriers of exclusion such as policies of discriminatory immigration., etc. This emphasis on cultural differences, the right to be culturally different, however, was conditional on the acceptance of the common social and political institutions of Australian society. This partial endorsement of culture has

been turned on its head by the critics of multiculturalism. This has opened the way for a new conservative cultural politics that seeks to defend the cultural distinctiveness of Australia. It is this thinking which gained support from a broad segment of Australian society, and helped to fuel a strident new Australian nationalism, bordering on xenophobia.

This new nationalism posited a new assimilationism built around a logic of differentiation, of exclusion, not a logic of inferiority. It sought to identify who belongs and those who do not belong to the Australian nation. This was vividly expressed in the cryptic slogan carried by beach goers at Cronulla – ‘we grew here, you flew here’. The ‘culturally different’. i.e., those who were seen not to subscribe to core cultural values (however defined) were regarded as not belonging.

New formulations have begun to redefine the categories of those who belong to the Australian nation, and regarded as acceptable from those who need to be excluded. This was couched in the more acceptable language of desirable core ‘cultural values’ (never specified) considered essential for social cohesion and national unity. This constituted a new way of defining exclusion. The implicit, if not explicit, assumption here was that the pursuit of conventional multiculturalism had, by celebrating and promoting other cultures, led to the denigration of the valued ‘shared culture’ of the nation..

What we need to recognize is that the fashionable ‘culture talk’, including the moral rhetoric of desirable values and responsibilities of citizens, is central to the manifestation of Australian racism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is this link between culture and national identity that is reminiscent of the confounding of race, culture and nation at the time of Federation. We will not be able to engage in a real debate on racism as long as we equate social cohesion and social harmony, with cultural unity. As one writer puts it, ‘culture is not the problem, nor the solution;

What is crucial to nation building is *not shared values* but a *shared identity* which derives from an acceptance of identification with a common set of social and political institutions. The prime requirement is to reaffirm the indissoluble principles of a liberal democracy that binds us together as a political community, but at the same recognizes ‘difference’. We need to recognize that we identify with the *political*

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nation, conceived of as 'self governing, political and moral community and not a *cultural* nation derived from some set of mythical core cultural values signifying unifying culture values of the dominant group in society.

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## Confronting the source of Racism.

Amidst the plethora of concept theories, ideas and speculations thrown around to make sense of the sad events surrounding Cronulla beach, are the notions of 'race' and 'racism'. The *West Australian* (14/12) in a perceptive editorial urged Prime Minister John Howard 'not to try to duck the reality that racism exists in Australia and that its effects are ugly'. The denial of racism is indeed characteristic of mainstream Australian society. Whenever the ugly face of racism erupts, the characteristic response is to hose down the flames with sanctimonious platitudes and wait for the next incident, Surely it is time we were honest enough to confront this cancer which is eating into the body politic. But first we need to understand Australian racism.

Although the terms 'race' and 'racism' go hand in hand, they refer to different ideas and underlying social processes. 'Race' is a term widely employed to refer to a way of classifying groups according to inheritable features (e.g., eye shape, skin colour, etc.) and/or other characteristics and attributes which are presumed to influence behaviour positively or negatively depending on how a racial group is perceived. Hence, we have racial stereotypes such as the misogynist Lebanese youth etc. In short, 'race' depicts the social reality of a group labeled and perceived as a racial group. But what we need to grasp is the construction of race when it is manifest as racism, as prejudice, discrimination or bigotry.

Racism is mainly about the meanings we give to racialized groups such as negroes, Jews, white Caucasians, etc. The 'meanings' we attach to racial groups may be based on racial stereotypes or the distinctive 'culture' associated with a particular racial group. The latter refers to the way these groups are believed to act and feel along with the associated values, beliefs, and attitudes attached to a racial group, often the basis of stereotypes we have about these groups. It is, however, this conjunction of culture

and 'race' which becomes central to any understanding of racism in contemporary society.

Importantly, we have learned over the years to identify more than one kind of racism, One form of racism is the 'old racism' associated with the now discredited grounds of inherited biological (biological racism). Racism in this sense has its own language of discourse. This has produced distinctive manifestations of racism as exemplified in the kind of racist discourse of South African apartheid or racial segregation in the US. What is characteristic of this form of racism – 'old racism' – is that it spells out its own logic of inferiority/superiority and leads to the practice of racial discrimination, the extreme manifestations of the holocaust or Kluge of Southern USA. As against this 'old racism' there exists another kind of racism which places emphasis on the 'cultural' differences between groups perceived as racial groups. These differences pertain to the discernible fact that racial groups are also set apart from each other on the grounds of cultural differences. The latter refer to characteristics such as a common national origin or descent, myths, and symbols identifying a people or 'nation'. Thus, for example, German racism has tended to place the emphasis on a distinctive cultural heritage, a unity of descent. The conjunction of race and culture serves to highlight how one's cultural heritage and ancestry, particularly when it is confined within territorial boundaries of a nation state and has become the hallmark of much of contemporary nationalism, referred to sometimes as Xeno-racism.

To take an example from Australian history, at the time of Federation we witnessed a powerful push for what Sir Henry Parkes described as 'One Nation, One Destiny'.

This was a plea for *racial* and *cultural* unity or homogeneity as the basis of national unity or identity. This required the pursuit of a policy of hardline assimilation to avoid

inter-group conflicts, and create 'one happy family'. What was foremost in this policy rationale was exclusion of 'others', and differentiations between 'them and 'us' based on <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ conflation of the notions of race, culture and nation. ~~This was~~ <sup>This</sup> the foundation and basis of Australian nationalism at the time of Federation and embodied in statute in the form; of what came to be known as the 'White Australia' policy. This was the bedrock of Australian public policy for over half a century and embodied both types of racism – of inferiority and exclusion. <sup>— which have persisted to this day</sup> Or, as more recent social science theorists have put it, this led to two kinds of the logic of racism – one a *logic of inferiority* and the other a *logic of differentiation*.

In the latter half of the 20th century, for a variety of reasons – economic, social, and political – the influx of waves of new settlers has led to new policies of settlement which have deviated from hardline assimilationism, one of monocultural anglo conformity. From 1970 onwards, these new policy strategies labeled as 'multiculturalism' promoted with bi-partisan endorsement were directed primarily towards the effective integration of new settlers into Australian society. These policies led to the removal of institutional barriers of exclusion such as policies of discriminatory immigration, etc. and have helped make Australia a more open and less racist society. <sup>The</sup> ~~The~~ language of 'old racism' based on biological and inherited difference was replaced by a new language of ethnicity and cultural differences enshrined as a form of 'cultural pluralism'. There is no doubt that, given the socio-economic context in which these policies were nurtured, they have proved effective in managing <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ increasing diversity of Australian society. Admittedly, these policies have run into difficulties in the new economic climate of the post 1980s as well as the rapidly changing socio-political environment after 9/11 and 7/7.

Constrained by these factors, the practice of multiculturalism, without resorting to the use of the languages of 'old racism of inferiority and racial stereotype, <sup>NP.</sup> hereafter designated 'Australia Multiculturalism' by John Howard, as the new formulation of Australian multiculturalism, <sup>Howard era.</sup> began to redefine the categories of those who belong to the Australian nation, and regarded as acceptable from those who need to be excluded. This was couched in the more acceptable language of desirable core 'cultural values' (never specified) and moral qualities considered essential for social cohesion and national unity. This constituted a new way of defining exclusion. The implicit, if not explicit, assumption here was that the pursuit of multiculturalism, <sup>conventional form</sup> celebrating and promoting other cultures, <sup>had</sup> led to the denigration of the valued 'shared culture' of the nation. This was conceived as a culture entrenched in the anglo-celtic heritage of Australian reminiscent of the sentiments of the founding fathers of Federation.

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~~Over time, there arose~~ a strident new Australian nationalism which appealed to a broad segment of Australian society drawn mainly from middle Australia, the power base of Pauline Hanson's One Nation, as well as <sup>several</sup> conservative academics and politicians. This new nationalism posited a new assimilationism which was built around a logic of differentiation, of exclusion, not a logic of inferiority, and sought to identify those who belong and those who do not belong to the Australian nation. This was vividly expressed in the cryptic slogan carried by beach goers at Cronulla - 'we grew here, you flew here'. In other words, the aliens, the 'culturally different'. i.e., those who were seen to <sup>not</sup> subscribe to ~~the~~ core cultural values (however defined) were regarded as not belonging. This surely was the cri de couer of the Patriotic Youth League at the Cronulla beach.

This new thinking prompted by. Murdoch's political parties and their supporters in the establishment have helped to fuel a

What we need to acknowledge is that this link between national identity and exclusion is central to the manifestation of Australian racism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is sadly

reminiscent of the confounding of race, culture and nation at the time of Federation. Once again, as in 1901, 'racism' has emerged as 'the most important single component of Australian nationalism (McQueen). The challenge of racism is surely not to discard multiculturalism, or relegate it to the fringes of national policy as the Coalition has done since 1996. The prime requirement is to reaffirm the indissoluble principles of a liberal democracy that binds us together as a political community, but at the same recognize 'difference'.

Perhaps the new West Australian Charter on Multiculturalism <sup>with its rationale for a ~~civic identity~~ more republican, civic multiculturalism</sup> which endeavours to fashion <sup>through an</sup> an inclusive multiculturalism <sup>and</sup> through a sense of participatory citizenship <sup>a new sense of belonging to the political community</sup> may <sup>thus</sup> provide us with a beacon light into the future. Above all, we need to recognize that we

*will* identify with the political nation, conceived of as 'self governing', political and moral community and not a cultural nation derived from some set of mythical core cultural values signifying unifying culture values of the dominant group in society. In short, the real basis of unity, social cohesion, solidarity and social integration lies not in shared values but a shared identity which derives from an acceptance and identification with a common set of social and political institutions



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