

# **THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE**

**Edited by  
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# Introduction

Marie de Lepervanche and Gillian Bottomley

In the wake of the 'Blainey debate' which erupted in Australia in 1984, academics in various disciplines have been preoccupied with both continuities and discontinuities in our thinking about race over the last two centuries. Another topic of more popular public concern is the forthcoming bicentenary of white settlement in Australia which, to Aboriginal people, is hardly cause for celebration at all, given their experience of conquest and racism since 1788. These were some of the reasons why the Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture held a conference on The Cultural Construction of Race in August 1985. This collection offers some of the papers to a wider readership. Although the immediate interests of contributors range over topics as diverse as eighteenth century voyages in the Pacific to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, there are common threads linking their concerns; these include the implications for western culture of constructing the 'imagined communities' of race and nation, and the consequences for non-western others of these historical constructions of the body and the body politic.

For earlier generations, the biological foundations for race differences were incontrovertible and these 'natural' bodily distinctions were believed to parallel the observed differences between cultural achievements in the 'civilised' and not-so-civilised world. During European hegemony over colonial possessions in the 19th century, empirical observation and scientific experiment 'proved' the inferiority of other races and legitimated their subjugation. Hitler's Germany carried this kind of thinking and practice to its genocidal conclusion. After the second World War we seemed for a while to have buried race and racism as an extraordinary amount of international labour migration throughout the western world, often from former colonies, produced physically and culturally heterogeneous populations in many western nation states. Guest workers in Europe, black immigrants in Britain and southern Europeans and Asians in Australia entered the hosts' workforces, often in low status jobs where their labour was needed. Their increasing visibility, particularly after recession began in the early 1970s, elicited the host response that they, the immigrants, were social problems.

In Australia, according to Blainey, there are too many Asians entering at a time when jobs are short: their customs are not like ours and this dif-

ference poses a threat to the Australian way of life. Immigration policy should therefore take note of the ordinary Australian's concern for this cultural disruption, attendant upon the Vietnamese refugee intake particularly, and the nation should look more to its traditional sources of migration, for example the United Kingdom, for future settlers. Our family reunion scheme, in Blainey's words, is a racial reunion scheme and if we are not careful Australia will become an Asian nation unless significant changes with respect to immigration are made (Blainey, 1984).

In this way of thinking, race, culture and nation are conflated. Yet, the crude racism of the nineteenth century and of Hitler's Reich, when Europeans equated phenotype with cultural superiority/ inferiority, is not publicly condoned today. Even the biologists have rejected race as a legitimate scientific category. But a 'new racism' has emerged in which physical and cultural differences are accepted as natural and the argument proceeds from an acceptance of a human nature which we all share (Cf. Barker, 1981). Thus, it is human nature to cleave to one's own kind, one's culture and one's nation. The rationalisations for excluding those who look different or who are culturally unlike us, then, does not directly appeal to old fashioned notions of race but to ideas about an allegedly universal human nature that is nepotistic and which seeks to preserve its own national way of life.

In both the United Kingdom and Australia, where populations are now both ethnically/ 'racially' heterogeneous, Enoch Powell and Geoffrey Blainey respectively appeal to an ethnic/ 'racial' homogeneity to ensure social cohesion. Their arguments ignore the structural inequalities of class as well as differences in social power between various other segments of the population, for example, gender divisions. Even so, this prescription for cohesion and social harmony makes common sense to some people; while local Australians compete for jobs with 'ethnics', and Australian children compete for university places with Asians who work hard and win entry to tertiary institutions, and while new arrivals who look different from us live in hostels located in areas of high immigrant settlement, then, physical difference and cultural divisions are easily held up as the sources of social anxiety about threats to our national way of life. Blainey's intervention tends to legitimate these fears and, despite all the rhetoric of multiculturalism, the possibility of a constantly changing Australian culture, or cultures, is ignored. The quest for homogeneous identity also excludes the Aboriginal presence.

The rejection of race as a biological category notwithstanding, for some Europeans and Australians white superiority is a fact of life. After all, Europe had its colonies until recently and many Australians grew up with a 'White' Australia policy that lasted into the 1960s. Insofar as there has

been an historical process of reifying race in European and Australian discourse since the 19th century, the idea of race continues to inform our common sense even though the terms we use may have changed. This process of racialisation, as Robert Miles (this volume) calls it, remains a powerful ideological device that inheres in the political life of Britain and Australia.

The academic reaction to Blainey nevertheless has tended to be critical, particularly the historians' comments which have extended to Blainey's earlier work on Aboriginal occupation of the continent as well as covering his more recent publications (Cf. Markus and Ricklefs, 1985). Some Australian social scientists are also exploring this field of the 'new racism' in commentaries on Aboriginal social life and through critical analyses of 'ethnicity' and 'multiculturalism' as explanatory concepts (Cf. Cowlshaw and Kalantzis, this volume; Bottomley and de Lepervanche, 1984). The influence of contemporary philosophical debates is also apparent in the work of other scholars who consider the power of language/ knowledge in directing the course of debate about the 'other', and in constructing categories of thought, such as race, culture and nation, in which the 'other' has a subordinate place (Cf. Barker and Lechte, this volume). All take issue with the Blainey view and with those who posit, implicitly or explicitly, a human nature that makes ethnocentrism and/ or racism 'natural' and inevitable. All share the common problem, as well, of theorising the predicament created by the construction of these 'imagined communities'; for even while struggling out of one paradigm in which race, culture and biology are equated, we invariably use language and terms inappropriate to our new theoretical perspectives!

Given that British academic enterprise has produced a distinct field of race relations sociology which, in turn, has been appropriated by British administrative practice with respect to Indian and Afro-Caribbean immigrants to the United Kingdom, we are fortunate to have Robert Miles' contribution because he scrutinises the reification of race in British commonsense notions about black immigrants and looks critically at the race relations industry itself. In the process, Miles questions his academic colleagues and the consequences of their theories; he also charts the racialisation of British political discourse over the last quarter century, during which time black immigrants provided much of the unskilled and semi-skilled labour for British industry. While examining Enoch Powell's contribution in shifting the direction of this discourse from an explicit emphasis on race and immigration in the 1950s to an accent on nation and repatriation in the 1960s, Miles demonstrates the historical connection between British nationalism and racism. For Australians, whose emergent nationalism with Federation in 1901 was so clearly grounded in a racism that excluded non-Europeans and denigrated the Aboriginal inhabitants of

the continent, there are familiar echoes here. There are also lessons to be learnt both from a comparison between British and Australian experiments with immigration, and from understanding the way Enoch Powell legitimated commonsense notions of race in articulating a theory of nationalism that evoked the Englishman's (sic) 'natural' affection for the British way of life and his 'natural' desire to defend it from the 'alien' threat.

In John Lechte's contribution we first go back to the eighteenth century to consider both the antecedents of our modern conceptions of race, especially insofar as they were generated by the voyages of colonial exploration in the Pacific, and the discontinuities between an earlier ethnocentrism and the more modern forms of racism. Lechte's essay raises the general problem of the European's representation of the 'other' and its limitations. Drawing on Foucault, Lechte discusses how the interrelation between the development of nineteenth and twentieth century state power (compared with the sovereign power of eighteenth century absolute monarchies) and biology have had particular consequences for populations and their surveillance. These consequences include both the construction of 'races' and their destruction through genocide.

A preoccupation with surveillance and with bodily differences within its population has characterised the rather blundering attempts by Australian governments over the last 199 years to order and control the Aboriginal people. In his survey of the Australian use of racial concepts in legislation and as governmental statistical categories, Andrew Markus shows how race and nation have been conflated, as have race and culture, both with respect to discourses about Aborigines and in recent legislation purporting to outlaw racism. The Racial Discrimination Act 1975, for instance, presents a paradox in that categories like race, colour and ethnic/national origin are lumped together at the same time as the legislation tries to remove or make illegal the pejorative evaluations attached to them.

Notwithstanding the intent of legislation designed to be anti-racist, the circumstances that many Aboriginal people find themselves in today testify to continuing white racism in this country. Gillian Cowlshaw's essay addresses this issue through a commentary on the silences about racism-as-a-problem in a number of anthropological characterisations of Aboriginal culture. Although a version of her paper has appeared in an anthropological journal, the version given at the Conference and which appears here is included in the hope that it reaches a readership that is interdisciplinary. Cowlshaw recalls nineteenth century notions of race and explores the way in which these continue to inform, if only implicitly, current ideas of cultural difference between various kinds of contemporary Aboriginal people. She refers to continuities in commonsense notions



about 'real' Aborigines in the north of the continent and the black urban dwellers of the south, and specifically addresses the anthropological construction of traditional Aboriginal culture as distinctive of northern areas of Australia and now allegedly gone or destroyed in the south. This north/south distinction, according to Cowlshaw, implicitly relies on theories of culture that draw on nineteenth century notions of race, despite explicit rejections of the latter. Such theories also fail to credit Aboriginal people with resisting white domination to the extent that they have, or with their capacity to construct new and different cultures from their experiences of domination and disadvantage after white conquest.

Focusing on other segments in the Australian population who have also experienced ethnocentrism or racism, Mary Kalantzis attempts in her essay to deconstruct the racism embedded in Multicultural policy and practice in the educational field. She argues that as schooling in Australia is compulsory until children reach the age of fifteen years, educational institutions are crucial sites for socialisation and that multiculturalism, despite its rhetoric of understanding other cultures and the politics of difference, implicates the old notion of race (and hence social inequality) while trying to reject earlier racisms. Kalantzis suggests an alternative teaching programme for schools in the Social Literacy Project which provides room for both celebrating cultural diversity and recognising the structural inequalities of class and the associated disadvantages immigrants are implicated in. This Project is designed specifically to empower children and their teachers to understand these inequalities and to intervene actively in their own lives and self-creation.

Another kind of social inequality is the major concern of de Lepervanche's paper, namely, gender inequality and the complex interrelation between nationalism, racism and sexism in Australian society. She briefly considers the extent to which racism and nationalism, and the institution of the family with which both are often associated, affect men and women differently. She argues that the intersection of class, race and gender inequalities provide women with a particular kind of social disadvantage that is rarely mentioned in the literature. Yet in nineteenth century Australia, and also since the introduction of non-Anglophone immigrants since World War II, both racist and sexist ideologies have flourished in public evaluations and representations of the nation and the family.

The representation of woman as sexual object, together with other images of race and gender, are the topics of Mira Crouch's essay on Puccini's 'Madam Butterfly'. Considered as a metaphor, Butterfly in her kimono, 'singing her heart out', becomes the 'quintessential female figure'. Crouch's thesis is that in this opera Puccini transforms a racial (and gender) stereotype into an archetype. Drawing on information about Puccini's

lifelong preoccupation with women and their voices, Crouch argues that his objectification of Butterfly continues to 'speak to' audiences today.

Barbara Lovric's contribution looks to the colonial experience and after in Indonesia, and to the construction by various writers of 'culturally induced' mental illness among its population. Formerly, Europeans tended to consider many of these diseases to be the result of 'racial' pre-dispositions, but in more recent years cultural rather than racial stereotyping has become more common. In criticism of this trend to arraign a people's culture, Lovric suggests that some of the indigenous medical classifications invite greater attention and that tropical neurology has a lot to learn about exotic 'mental disorders'. As Lovric also notes, the politics of medical research tend to direct efforts towards lengthening the lives of affluent people instead of concentrating on the impoverished or less well off populations.

In the final paper of the volume, in which Phil Barker contemplates the silences in philosophical discourse concerning Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, some of the themes addressed in other papers recur. The exclusion of *My Struggle* from works commonly classified as 'philosophical' and the untranslatability of the title (we know it best in German), suggests to Barker that for English speakers, at least, the book and its author's practices are totally alien to our own. Yet, as Barker points out, *Mein Kampf* is part of the European cultural heritage and needs to be seriously addressed as such. Neither fascism nor racism is exclusive to Hitler's Reich.

Another theme Barker considers is the overcoming of namelessness in Hitler's rise to power, and the search for an identity that draws on a past cultural history that is continuous with the present. The achievements of a glorious past are thus used to construct the homogeneous 'pure' who belong to the group and to exclude the 'other'. This theme recalls Enoch Powell's reference to the Englishman's instinct for continuity and his desire to keep the 'alien' from sharing in the British nation (cf. Miles this volume; Barker, 1981: 21-22, 32, 39).

In multicultural Australia we may think Enoch Powell's arguments for repatriating black immigrants are irrelevant to us, but Barker reminds us that our preparations for bicentennial celebrations are not without a search for origins, an identity and for continuities. It is as well to remember the Aboriginal experience of discontinuity and domination.