The Cultural Deconstruction of Racism: Education and Multiculturalism

Mary Kalantzis

In this paper I examine attempts at the deconstruction of racism in the contemporary Australian context, particularly in the fields of education and multicultural policy and practice. By this, I mean deconstruction not only in terms of the epistemological explanation of racism and multiculturalism in schools, but also the practical imperatives arising from analysis, which include an attempt to dismantle racism. What I am referring to then is a dual analytical and interventionist project which is struggling to make its mark.

I choose the areas of multiculturalism and education for two reasons. First, schooling in Australia is a compulsory, universal experience and therefore an important site for examination, both as the reflection and reflector of processes of socialisation. Second, the questions of so-called 'race' and 'race relations' as introduced through multiculturalism, although misshapen and problematic, have made their most widespread inroads into education, albeit often only obliquely through the concepts of culture and ethnicity.

A critique of multiculturalism is crucial to any exercise in the deconstruction of racism because multiculturalism begins by asking some very important questions - What is Australian society like? What could it be like? Given Australia's history, the response to these questions, both in terms of analysis and possible intervention, implicates the issue of racism.

But aside from this, and perhaps more importantly, the framework within which the multicultural movement worked by and large is indicative of a more general phenomenon in the dynamic of modern industrial societies which have had to deal with, mask and/ or transform the history of racist practices and ideology. The nation state of advanced industrial society can no longer draw its identity from a single homogeneous ethnic group. It does, as its rhetoric says, have to create cohesion out of diversity, but to do this it has to make the diverse groups appear equal. Multiculturalism springs from this new imperative. It addresses the traditional question of race

in a new guise through the politics of difference buttressed by a keenly developed notion of the individual and of plurality (cf. Barker, 1981).

But it still has history to contend with. Briefly, Australia has had a continuous history of racism both in terms of processes that have structured social life, such that certain groups of people have been disadvantaged, and which have produced prejudices that are linked directly or indirectly to such processes. In terms of the pre-existing Aboriginal settlement, the establishment of western society and, later, industrialism in Australia has involved systematic and conscious violence that is now so well documented (cf. Rowley, 1970; Reynolds, 1981). That many Australians choose to dismiss or ignore the origins of their own everyday life forms in Australia shows that this historical act of racism is, in an important sense, continuous and still incomplete.

In the process of European settlement there emerged a second history of racism, namely, against certain immigrants who brought their own patterns of solidarity with them and who were distinguishably 'different', such as the Irish and the Chinese in the nineteenth century and the post-war non-Anglophone migrants and refugees of the twentieth century. However, it was not difference that fashioned racism so much as the structural location of each new group, insofar as it appeared to threaten organised labour and the order of those already established (cf. Collins, 1975; de Lepervanche, 1975).

On the other side of this coin, racism has been used by post-war governments to sell their immigration programs to the Australian people. Immigration, according to the rhetoric, need not threaten Australian society because only those who could be readily, and relatively easily, assimilated would be brought in. Into the 1960s, there was an implicit argument embodied in the White Australia Policy that Europeans who were like us would create jobs and improve living standards, but Asians would have a deleterious effect because they were unlike us. People were thus actively consoled about migration through ideological arguments along racist lines. Nor has racism been the exclusive preserve of longer-established Australians. Newer migrants in some circumstances bring their own forms of racism, born of entirely different historic circumstances from those in Australia.

Yet very contradictorily, openness and plurality sit beside these histories of racism. Modern industrial societies and the international migration of labour throw people of different backgrounds together although there are no natural reasons why people should be racist. Labour force segmentation, however, is an integral part of the functioning of modern industrial societies, and ethnic segmentation is a part of this in Australia today, thus

providing the structural bases for a new racism. The liberalising, equalising dynamic of modern industrial society in some respects therefore confronts the structural underpinnings of racism (cf. Collins, 1984).

It is this history that multiculturalism has had to address and rework. It does so in two ways: one by description and the other by prescription. The description is a truism. There are people in Australia of many different so-called 'racial', cultural or ethnic backgrounds. The function of the energy expended in this description is to contribute information that will allow the servicing of this diversity. This has been particulary important given that, for a while from the late 1960s, many migrants were leaving to go back home, thus Australia was losing on their social cost. Another critical aspect of this description is its effect on the other prong of multiculturalism - its prescription for Australian society. But prescription is not a simple matter. The description and declaration of Australia as a Multicultural Society is part of the strategy for forging a new national identity, of promoting some pleasant state of harmony between the various groupings. As such it indicates two things.

First, the new nation does not need a single 'ethnic' or 'racial' descriptor. The rallying symbols could well be a famous yacht, a brand of coffee or a soft drink jingle. A certain diversity at the level of skin colour, language, customs and so on, is characteristic of all modern industrial societies, given their histories of interaction with indigenous peoples, labour migration and their relations with a world market. Second, the fact that there is a need for such prescription necessarily implies that things are not so pleasant. The superficial pleasant diversity has embedded within it another diversity: that of inequality (cf. Bottomley and de Lepervanche, 1984).

But there is tension in the prescriptive task of multiculturalism. Something that has been as integral and as functional as racism, so long an element in Australian history, cannot be deconstructed so easily. And there have been very few within the social arenas using the term multiculturalism, either as a policy or servicing device, who have been prepared to tackle seriously what has been 'unpleasant' in the construction of our newly professed plurality. The exceptions would be some of the Aboriginal people.

Multiculturalism only declares difference by counting the numbers and superficially describing the features of the different 'racial', ethnic or cultural groupings. Overwhelmingly, the strategy employed for intervention in an attempt to overcome 'unpleasantness' is to soften the heart. The keywords in the rhetoric have been 'attitudes', 'self-esteem', 'tolerance', 'respect', 'understanding' and 'sensitisation'. The main goal has been to encourage people to feel good about difference. After all, modern industrial societies simply have to function smoothly. This condition just happens to

have involved, along the way, the usurpation of the structural basis for the reproduction of life of the indigenous people and the massive migration of cheap labour from distant and unevenly developed parts of the world. Yet, these events are silences in the pleasant discourse of multiculturalism.

To achieve this goal of smooth functioning, multiculturalism in Australia has had to attempt three things. First it has had to respond to the demands of those indigenous people who survived, so as to appear to transform the first major racist moment in Australian history. Second, it has needed to break long-standing ideologies of parochialism and racial prejudice in the dominant so-called anglo-Australian population. And third, it has curiously had to support traditionalism for 'ethnics' and indigenous people in the search for something that appears to demonstrate their cultural autonomy and social equality.

These tasks create a problem which in part is resolved by defining what can be 'multi' in Australia in a very narrow way: essentially all those things that are private and conducted in spare time. If what defines people's identity is something they do in their spare time, unique to them as individuals, and if all these things are held to be equal - colour of skin, food, music, religion and so on - deep practices of racism and other structural inequalities are masked. The fact that non-English speaking people are disproportionally represented at the bottom of the social pile and that many indigenous people do not figure in the pile at all, can be ignored.

The ethnic or cultural revival that is supposed to be part of multiculturalism is not anti-racist in any significant way because it refers predominantly to difference only at the level of cultural phenomena. In fact, it could be said that its effect has been mainly to displace the issue of racism thereby masking its history.

This is precisely what is happening in schools. The interpretation of culture and ethnicity mainly at the level of cultural phenomena has contributed to an understanding of difference that masks inequality, that ignores the pedagogical imperatives of modern industrial societies and that provides an inadequate social analysis. In consequence, despite its intentions, multiculturalism can and does end up being racist. Singing and dancing on the dole queue in your community language, happy to be ethnic, does not dismantle racism.

Of course, the task of dismantling racism cannot be put solely at the feet of education. But a focus on education does provide a good case study of the requirements of deconstruction both at the level of analysis and intervention. If we take New South Wales as an example, the empirical evidence bears out the contradictory nature of multicultural education as it is

presently practised and reveals the limitations of its interventions in contributing to the dismantling of racism.

At the level of policy, the rhetoric is full of phrases like 'diversity with cohesion' and it demands that 'multiculturalism' be viewed as a 'positive' term. So, right from the start, 'negative' things like 'racism', as a process that produced the plurality as an effect, are disallowed. In 1983-84 for example, the Multicultural Education Co-ordinating Committee of New South Wales allocated 50% of its 1.5 million dollars annual budget to community languages, 25% to ethnic liaison officers, 10% to Aboriginal education and 15% to socio-cultural projects. In the socio-cultural category, the average grant was for about $2,000 and went towards projects with titles like 'Intercultural Understanding', 'Multicultural History of Batlow', 'Finger-painting - a multicultural experience' (That received $8,000) and 'Who is an Australian?'. Understanding through exposure to difference and the promotion of self-esteem through the school's recognition and teaching of parents' language are the main emphases.

The other major prong of funding, to English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching, is so poorly funded and supported in comparison to the needs, that it often does not prepare children beyond survival English (Campbell, 1984: Campbell and McMeniman, 1985). So its capacity to counter-balance the effects of structural racism is limited. At the teacher training level, one example of this limited intervention is a course called 'Culture Contact in the Classroom'. Its seminars include 'Finding out about other Cultures', Ethnicity and Identity', 'Ethnic Institutions in Australia' and 'Culture Bias'.

The sites for action signalled in these examples have of course made spaces for some people and some projects that do tackle racism head on. The scene is not entirely bleak. But my argument is that positive measures are minimal because the analysis that informs intervention disallows a systematic and rigorous understanding of racism.

Issues pertaining to structural racism, such as underachievement at school, the need for alternative credentialling for indigenous people and those of non-English speaking background, inadequacies of access in the transition from school to work, the traumas of settlement and serious cultural conflict, are all sidestepped. The fact that some people consider Australian Aborigines in their daily interactions today as inferior does not itself create their inequality. Their current position can only really be understood in terms of the structural effects of racism in Australian history. Telling Aboriginal people that their traditional practices and products are still important, putting their visual images into galleries, does not provide either the basis for reproducing their culture as something other than 'commodities' or 'art' (neither of which they were in traditional gathering and

hunting life), nor does it equip them for contemporary self-determination.

There is a real fear and reluctance in schools to address these issues of racism; their displacement into happy philosophies of 'difference' exacerbates this tendency. There exists in schools a general tendency to believe that children only experience racism as attitudes and therefore a teacher can work at the problem simply at this level. Thus schools typically assert either that racism is not too much of a problem in Australia or, if it is a problem, then it is just a matter of changing one's heart. Within this framework, racism becomes a moral lapse that can be rectified by imbibing sentiments like 'everyone is beautiful in their own way, even if they are different from me' or, 'all differences are of equal value and should be respected'. In this model, racism is viewed as an accident of individual pathology which is rectifiable by therapy.

When, on one piece of research, we asked children in schools what it is like living in a society like Australia with people from different backgrounds, their answers included many comments such as the following: 'My mum can't read or write and can't help me with my homework.' 'My dad works like a kid in the factory of the cakes.' 'It feels like you are being invaded.' 'We will have to widen our industries.' 'We will need more graveyards.' 'I'm not allowed to have Australian friends.' 'I know I'll be on the dole.' The children themselves consistently raised problems that could not be resolved simply by the learning of their own community languages or those of others. Self-esteem and integrity comes with the possibility of full social participation, not with being patted on the head for being 'ethnic' or 'different' (Kalantzis and Cope, 1981).

In public debate multiculturalism has contested meanings. Part of this contest involves redefining the term so that its stated goals can be realised. A diverse society of equals is surely a worthy aim. A non-racist society, even if not of equals, is another worthy goal. There is also an important task in removing from the process of social segmentation those explanations of inequality that rely on the 'natural', as racism does. That is, an analysis of cultural plurality in Australia that recognises the historic role of racism in fashioning social relations between those elements that constitute diversity would prescribe something quite different from the current predominant practices of multiculturalism.

Very briefly, in the area of schooling, this prescription would involve affirmative action that aimed to remove the structures of inequality at the level of the whole school. It would mean at the compulsory levels of schooling a core curriculum that had equal outcomes as a goal. The push to diversified, school-based curricula that is now in full swing in New South Wales would not be used, as they minimise the life chances of children of non-English speaking backgrounds by masking their needs. The alternative I suggest

could make possible creative, intensive responses to redress the effects of structural inequality (Kalantzis and Cope, 1985). For instance, the process of language learning would not be one that drew mainly upon the rationale of building self-esteem through respect for cultural difference, but would consider language as a tool for communication, action, power and self-determination (Kalantzis and Cope, 1986).

Teacher training would not rely on 'finding out about other cultures'. The emphasis would be more on the pedagogical imperatives of modern industrial societies as they relate to all people irrespective of their backgrounds, and there would be an emphasis on the acquisition of skills that make genuine cultural choices possible. This would involve every teacher in language training across all disciplines.

With respect to materials and curriculum, the task is not simply to remove stereotyping and widen ethnic representation, but to develop coherent and sustained mainstream programs and resources that enable all students to understand the processes of their cultural construction. To that end, it is important that in Australia at the moment the current dichotomy between curriculum process and curriculum content is resolved. It needs to be recognised that there is a specific and necessary content to an anti-racist curriculum.

The Social Literacy Project provides an example of an alternative model. It is a materials development project funded by the Multicultural Education Co-ordinating Committee of New South Wales, initially by accident, and against some conventional curriculum and multicultural wisdoms. It consists of social science materials for upper primary and lower secondary students. Its strategy is to argue to the head rather than the heart on issues of racism. Children, through a series of content inputs, are placed in experiences that facilitate the acquiring of conceptual tools for social analysis. The goal is the acquisition of knowledge and the examination of life practices that will inform them of the processes involved in becoming an 'ethnic', 'a white', 'a female', and so on. The outcome to which the program aspires is confident, effective, social participation and not the affective goal of absorbing tolerance by osmosis through exposure to difference.

For example, an input in the primary materials on Robinson Crusoe as the great individual who survived on his own by his natural skills, is the requirement to rethink this story to discover that Robinson did not survive on that island on his own. His 'natural' skills involved social products: a gun, a bible, a language and so on, all products constructed by many others in the culture in which he had been an active memeber. And such was the effect of his socialisation that when he met Man Friday, he presumed he

had no faith, no language, no skills and so Robinson proceeded not only to dominate his homeland but to transform Friday into a 'human', 'cultured' construct. The children engage in the activity as fun. The process is discovery learning. But the experience is structured to ensure examination of the concepts of sociality, the individual, culture as learnt, ethnicity and so on.

So far as content is concerned, the starting point for the Social Literacy materials are points of unity in the human experience: the need to satisfy basic human needs, be they material, spiritual or emotional. Difference is explored as historically and socially constructed. The approach is an holistic one, as opposed to a one-sided stress on phenomenal difference as in 'ethnic studies'. For example, it could be said that Australia is a plural society because you can go to a shop and buy Lebanese bread, white (Australian) sliced bread and Swiss bread. An activity associated with the discovery of this fact could be a school excursion to a Sydney suburb during which students could observe, record, classify and report on the differences they encountered in the shops on the main street.

The Social Literacy Project approaches its task in another way. For, although it is true that bread is an example of cultural diversity in Australia, this exists only at a certain level, because the way that Lebanese bread (made in factories, packed into plastic bags, and sold in shops) is produced and consumed is exactly the same as that for white sliced or Swiss bread. What is more important than dwelling on the phenomenon of difference is the structure of social relations associated with the apparent differences. At the level of everyday life, where Lebanese bread is part of a culture of take-away food, for example, the non-plurality is more profound than the plurality.

In terms of general outcomes, the Social Literacy materials stress the acquisition of skills in the form of a language that empowers children and makes active self-creation possible. By contrast, many of the efforts currently made in schools of high migrant density are tending to involve a slippage in what is offered to their students. Schools often go overboard trying to make kids feel good about being different. The structural bases of those differences are not examined.

Materials like those developed by the Social Literacy Project are an important part of anti-racist strategies in schools because they not only serve the immediate needs of the teachers wishing to respond to the issues but they also serve the purpose of educating the educators in a sensitive and confused field. Such materials have to be aimed at all children in the first instance

and incorporate skills as well as analysis (Kalantzis and Cope 1981, 1985; Kalantzis et.al., 1986).

But none of the strategies mentioned above can work on their own. Yet, in each case they can become catalysts for a broader critical education and for social action. The question of racism, most importantly, should not be viewed as one of psychology or moral lapse. Nor should anti-racist education become submerged in the celebration of diversity.

References

Barker, M. (1981) *The New Racism* London, Junction Books.
Bottomley, G. and de Lepervanche, M. (eds) (1984) *Ethnicity, Class and Gender in Australia* Sydney, Allen & Unwin.
Campbell, W.J. et.al. (1984) 'A Review of the Commonwealth English as a Second Language (ESL) Programme' Canberra, AGPS.
Campbell, W.J., and McMeniman, M.M. (1985) 'Bridging the Language Gap: Ideals and Realities Pertaining to Learning English as a Second Language' Canberra, AGPS.
Collins, J. (1984) 'Immigration and Class: the Australian Experience' in G. Bottomley and M. de Lepervanche (eds) *Ethnicity, Class and Gender in Australia* Sydney, Allen & Unwin.
Kalantzis, M. and Cope, B. (1981) *Just Spaghetti and Polka? An Introduction to Australian Multicultural Education* Sydney, Social Literacy
Kalantzis, M., and Cope, B. (1985) 'Pluralism and Equitability: Multicultural Curriculum Strategies for Schools' Canberra, National Advisory Co-ordinating Committee on Multicultural Education.
Kalantzis, M. et.al., *The Language Question; The Maintenance of Language Other than English* 2 vols. Canberra, AGPS.
Reynolds, H. (1981) *The Other Side of the Frontier* Townsville, History Department, James Cook University.
Rowley, C.D. (1970) *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* Vol. 1 Canberra, ANU Press.