

Racism and Sexism in Australian National Life

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In most discussions on racism - whether these concentrate on definitions, on the origins or history of racism, its association with capitalism, immigrant labour, nationalism or even with right wing politics - there is very little mention of the complex relation between racism and sexism. The exceptions in Australia are in a few sociological writings (Collins, 1984) and within the feminist literature (Curthoys, 1975; Gordon, 1975; Saunders, 1982; Aveling, 1985). Gordon's comments provide an example;

The oppression of women is closely interwoven with notions of race. In Australia... the desire for a high birthrate and the maintenance of racial strength and purity have long been national priorities... Concomitant with the cry 'to populate or perish', the decimation and containment of Aborigines and the exclusion and restriction of non-white immigrants, has been the confinement of women to their reproductive functions. White women in Australia have been viewed primarily as breeders of the Anglo-Saxon strain... (Gordon, 1975:40).

There is plenty of evidence to support Gordon's claim although many women have resisted these patriarchal demands.

Usually, the implicit if not explicit assumption underlying most analyses is that the perpetrators and victims of racism include men and women equally. To some extent that assumption holds, in certain circumstances and from certain viewpoints. For example, after 1901 white men *and* women in Australia contributed to the consensus over the White Australia Policy. Likewise, this policy excluded both male and female non-Europeans: but for those non-European males already domiciled here there were extra restrictions forbidding entry to their wives and children. There were also other important differences: when we consider the imagined communities of both 'race' and 'nation' (cf. Anderson, 1983), women's social position in each differs from men's.

Women in general have been subjected to a double structural load of inequality insofar as they have been associated with dependent, domestic reproduction and have been commonly designated the consumers, while

men have held sway in the public world of production and, if white, in politics. More particularly, insofar as race is concerned, women have also been prone to ideological slippage. Men keep shoving them across cultural boundaries when it suits them. In the male rhetoric of racism (and nationalism) women have occupied diverse positions all of which have sexist implications.

For example, when indentured coloured labour was introduced last century, it was predominantly male. Not only were whites frightened that the 'lower races' might breed if coloured women entered but, as Saunders comments, those Pacific Island women who did enter, and whose menfolk provided the Kanaka labour in Queensland's sugar fields, were not themselves acceptable initially as indentured servants

...because their reproductive capacities could endanger the whole structure of an easily replaceable, fluid, servile labour force...

Yet, when employers required an expanding labour force for the cane fields this led the white masters to change their minds so that they reasoned:

If field labour was 'nigger's work', then Island women could be allocated with impunity (Saunders, 1982:32).

Racism, like nationalism, comes in many different forms (Hall, 1978:26; Miles, 1982:101) and often race, nation and culture are conflated. What all varieties emphasise are both exclusion from the race, nation or culture and inclusion in the chosen 'we' group. Both exclusion and inclusion work differently for men and women.

During the late nineteenth century and in the period of the White Australia Policy it was often said of poor whites that they breed too fast, but on other occasions white women in general were portrayed as virtuous, rather stupid and in need of protection from the men of other races, particularly from the 'savage' Asiatics. Clergymen, politicians and journalists were all concerned. As the *Queensland Evangelical Standard* cried in 1876:

What happiness can any poor foolish country woman of ours expect from uniting in marriage with a soft, pulpy, childish but passionate kanaka or the light, yellow-skinned mummy of the Celestial Empire? (quoted in Evans et al., 1975:262)

The media were not alone; from the 1880s politicians vigorously opposed miscegenation in parliamentary debates on restrictive legislation, and instances of Anglo-Asian births were condemned (Curthoys, 1958:98;

Markus, 1985:11,13). Some spokesmen even argued for an instinct against intermarriage 'which seeks to save us from an act fatal to us as a *species*' (quoted in Cronin, 1975:293). This so-called instinct however seems to have been sex-specific, located in women only, because on the frontier and elsewhere white men violated Aboriginal women who were deemed unworthy of protection. Even if unions between black and white were not violent, their issue was commonly designated 'half-caste', if not 'the worst of both worlds'.

Even in the twentieth century non-Europeans and Aboriginals were considered unfit as citizens of the democratic, white nation until the 1960s (Palfreman, 1967). Aboriginal people were not even counted in the census until 1966. Some non-European men resided here but non-European women particularly were excluded during this period or, if permitted entry (as Indians were after 1919), the permission depended on satisfactory reports as to their husbands' or fathers' capacity to support them. Yet discriminatory state legislation often made this extremely difficult if not impossible for the men (de Lepervanche, 1984:60-69). In 1961 the number of overseas-born Chinese males in Australia was 11,287 compared with 3,545 females: the overseas-born Indian males numbered 2,683 compared with 367 females (Palfreman, 1967:145-6).

Not surprisingly then, until very recently the Australian nation was perceived as a racially and culturally homogeneous community (Markus, 1985:11) and the fertility of white women was of prime importance to those men in power. Immigration schemes introduced white settlers, predominantly from the United Kingdom, to populate the land, and in one way or another the desire for a high white birthrate has long been a national priority (Gordon, 1975; Cass, 1983b:177). Women's reproductive capacities, their dependent status and their association with mothering have all been crucial in the ideological battles around the issues of race and nation.

If women did not play their part properly as breeders, the race and nation were in danger. Indeed, the potential for both race and nation of properly performed motherhood was enormous. As one authority put it early this century:

Gaols, reformatories, policemen, all the paraphernalia of punishment that are supposed to be necessary to protect the world from the criminal might be scrapped and thrown into the limbo of mistaken opportunities, if only mothers would understand their duty and learn how to do it (quoted in Reiger, 1982:811).

Falling birthrates regularly upset our public spokesmen: as the rate in Australia fell from 38 per 1000 in 1870 to 27 per 1000 in 1900, alarm

spread in government circles. Male explanations for the decline included the use of contraception by women, which allegedly contributed to 'race suicide'. A 1903 report by the Commonwealth Statistician noted that the limitation of family size was a selfish and decadent phenomenon (McQueen, 1978:60, Coghlan, 1903). In 1920 the New South Wales Minister for Public Health and Motherhood warned in parliament that throughout the world:

...the black races are breeding ten to one of the white races... The only way to alter the balance in favour of the white races is to ensure that the women who are prepared to do their duty should not be penalised... (NSW Parliamentary Debates 1920:4087. quoted in Cass, 1983a:68-9).

It is sobering to realise that the maternal mortality rate in Australia actually rose between 1910 and 1930. In the 1920s it accounted for one-sixth of deaths of married women in early and mid-adult life (Roe, 1983:10). Never mind, women's job was breeding the race and in 1938, when the nation celebrated the 150th anniversary of Phillip's landing, women as breeders were honoured in pageant and verse. One example from a poetry competition included the following:

Ye girls of British race
Famous for your beauty
Breed fast in all your grace
For this is your duty.
As Anzac gave in war
So daughters at your call
Will quick respond the more
To replace those that fall (quoted in McQueen 1978:158).

Since 1938 we have been through a few more wars and labour shortages: women have regularly been exhorted to breed but we eventually had to abandon the White Australia Policy and stop talking about race as we used to. It was bad for trade with our Pacific neighbours. During World War II, however, women's duty temporarily broadened beyond breeding: they were expected to 'man' the factories for warwork. Afterwards they were encouraged to return to the home and breed while immigrants from the United Kingdom and northern Europe arrived to augment our numbers.

After the war, the stress on the assimilation of these newcomers to the 'Australian Way of Life' in government policy contradicted notions of racial or ethnic separateness and emphasised instead Anglo-conformism as a superior way of life. Under this policy other peoples' race, ethnicity and/ or culture, including the Aboriginals', were potentially adaptable in the interests of national unity. Then in 1973, with the first Labor government in 23 years, policy on immigration changed and since then it has stressed multiculturalism, family reunion and the celebration of diverse

ethnicities. We had by then many non-British settlers and had even begun to introduce some Asians. Provided they were technically or professionally qualified, i.e. of relatively high status, Asian male principals (as they are called) were accepted with their dependent wives and children from the late 1960s (Rivett, 1975).

With multiculturalism the accent fell on 'the family of the nation' (Grassby, 1973): indeed the family rather than the race became the heart of our national way of life. But the change from assimilation to multiculturalism accompanied another fall in the birthrate during the 1970s. National population enquiries followed and women were again publicly urged to breed (Cass, 1983b:177, 181). Their failure to do so was even cited as a cause for the 1970s recession (Dowse, 1983:219), and in 1977 the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney criticised both State and Federal Governments for funding Women's Health and Rape Crises Centres, saying that they 'disturb and destroy the inherited moral standards and values of our nation' and actively promote 'drastic change in normal human relationships' (SMH, 5 October 1977). 'Normal human relationships' mean women at home breeding. During the 1979 Abortion Debate in Federal Parliament the Minister for Health was reported as deploring the prevalence of abortion and the increased use of contraception. Both, he said, had upset planning projections and it would require a massive immigration programme to effect a population increase. Another MP concluded that Australia was on the path to self-genocide (SMH, 23 March 1979). Those women who did go out to work found (and still find) that women in general earn lower average wages than men and that grossly inadequate childcare facilities disadvantage them (Power et al., 1984).

The plurality of the nation's component ethnic groups today are not equal in status, and the workforce is segmented by ethnic origin and gender (Collins, 1984). Compared with Anglophone white males, southern European immigrants, for example, tend to fill the lower paid, less secure jobs, and immigrant women are particularly disadvantaged in this respect (Bottomly, 1984a; Martin, 1984; Collins, 1984). In addition, ethnic politics as well as national affairs remain in the hands of men (Jzucubowicz, 1984).

Persons from all ethnic groups are entitled to apply for family reunions, but it is common for males to introduce dependent kin; and although women in general are enjoined to breed it would seem that even as breeders some women are more favoured than others. The less privileged have been targets for doses of the drug Depo Provera, which prevents conception, despite the fact that the Australian Drug Evaluation Committee in 1977 ruled that it cannot be promoted as a contraceptive: its use may only occur on a trial or 'investigational' basis if administered to a patient on the basis of her 'informed' consent (Fraser and Weisberg, 1981). It is not known how many women are using the drug or how many have been in-

formed of its potential risks, but reports have surfaced concerning its use on illiterate women who allegedly 'could not remember to take a pill every night', on Aboriginal and some immigrant women (*Right to Choose*, No. 22 1981:5; *Melbourne Age*, 27 March 1981; *SMH*, 28 February 1981; *Sydney Sun*, 17 November 1975; *National Times*, 15-21 March 22-28 March 1981; Bottomley, 1984b).

Other forms of cultural constraints potentially affect all women. In Australia, as in Britain and Europe, racist and sexist ideologies have flourished with the post-war introduction of immigrant labour into many of the underprivileged jobs, and more recently as many locals and immigrants have become unemployed (Collins, 1975; 1984:21-24). As recession deepened in the West, the divisions between the many cultures and the so-called races or ethnic groups have been ever more clearly etched on the public mind by a new kind of argument that avoids mention of colour or race altogether, and which, unlike old-fashioned racism, does not mention inferior or superior endowments either. This new argument is part of an attempt to reconstitute a commonsense in which cultural difference *is* recognised but in which all peoples allegedly share a *common* human nature which 'naturally' inclines us to nepotism and to exclude whoever is alien to our way of life (Barker, 1981:25). This common sense sanctions ethnocentrism and provides what Barker calls the 'new racism' (1981). This common sense with its common human nature also constructs woman as breeder, within the family: as one MP in Britain put it:

It is part of the British way of life for the father to provide a home for the family, and it is the same in India... There is no rational argument in favour of saying that a wife in another country should be in a position to provide a home for her husband and children. It is contrary to all commonsense, human nature, and the way of life of both Britain and the subcontinent (Stanbrook, Hansard p.1052 quoted in Barker, 1981:23).

This common human nature not only informs common sense, it has also been legitimated by sociobiology. As the founder of this so-called science argues, 'Nationalism and racism... are the culturally nurtured outgrowths of simple tribalism' (Wilson, 1978:92). And 'simple tribalism', according to the sociobiologists' theory of kin selection, is rooted in family relationships. As van den Berghe expresses it: 'all known human societies are organised on the basis of kinship and marriage, forming relatively stable reproductive units called families and exhibiting preferential behaviour towards relatives' (1981:21).

Women's subordination in the domestic world of family is then explained by the sociobiologists' theory of parental investment; Trivers' version goes as follows;

...a copulation costing the male virtually nothing may trigger a nine-month investment by the female... followed... by a fifteen-year investment in the offspring... Although the male may often contribute parental care during this period, he need not necessarily do so. After a nine-month pregnancy, a female is more or less free to terminate her investment at any moment but doing so wastes her investment up until then. Given the initial imbalance in investment the male may maximise his chances of leaving surviving offspring by copulating and abandoning many females, some of whom, alone or with the aid of others, will raise his offspring (1978:62).

Nowhere does Trivers suggest that a crucial difference exists between bearing and rearing children. His scenario simply reproduces our stereotyped sex roles.

In Australia a version of this new commonsense, or new racism, has its most articulate spokesman in Geoffrey Blainey. He has not explicitly invoked sociobiology to support his views but he has clearly stated his value orientation which coincides in many ways with those who find sociobiology so attractive. For instance, in criticising present government immigration policy with respect to Asian entry, he says 'a family-reunion scheme is overwhelmingly a racial-reunion scheme' (1984:98), whereas the 'typical nation practises discrimination against migrants, for the sake of national unity' (1984:52). If Australia continued to treat all peoples of the world as equally eligible as immigrants, he argues, and the Asian percentage became the dominant stream, the 'Asian and Third World domination of the migrant lists would be self generating, and Australia would eventually become an Asian nation' (1984:119). Blainey complains that recent Australian governments have cut 'the crimson threads' of kinship with Britain and thereby disowned our past (1984:159), and now the 'desire to turn Australia into a new nation, a nation of all nations... contradicts the increasing sense of national pride that has become so vivid since the Whitlam era' (1984:153).

Here, of course, Blainey conflates race with nation and culture, and, like the sociobiologists, 'racial' homogeneity with social cohesion. He frankly admits to white ancestry from the British Isles and to a clear preference for 'our kind of society and most of its ruling values' (1984:17). These ruling values still include privileges for Anglo conformity and a subordinate status for women, otherwise we would have no need for anti-discrimination legislation.

Yet, Blainey faces a particular problem not shared by those who hold similar views in the UK. There, the new racism wants to exclude blacks and Asians from a country that has been white for thousands of years, and it includes in the definition of human nature an instinct to defend a home territory. As Enoch Powell proclaimed:

An instinct to preserve an identity and defend a territory is one of the deepest and strongest implanted in mankind... (Powell on BBC 1, 9 June, 1969, quoted in Barker, 1981:22).

In Australia, the whites by comparison are the recent invaders. Blainey's argument for maintaining the crimson thread of British kinship has to justify white conquest over the Aboriginal people, which he does implicitly in his histories by lauding the white (male) pioneers with their sweat, grit and ingenuity (1984:159), compared with the less developed nomads who initially inhabited the place less than 200 years ago (cf. Blainey in *Triumph of the Nomads* 1(1975); and cf. Reynolds, 1985). The white pioneers who penetrated the interior do not include women, and here Blainey's view of the Australian identity conforms to other (male) depictions of the national character as white, male and British (cf. Aveling, 1985:92).

Modern multiculturalism has not done much more for women either. Under 'White Australia' women were the rather stupid, passive breeders of the white race; in today's multicultural society pressures remain on women to stay in or return to the family, to reproduce and nurture. Although many white Anglo and European women resist these pressures, for some immigrant women resistance is not so easy. As Humphreys explains for Lebanese women;

The institutional arrangements which have traditionally diminished the prerogatives of husbands and transferred these to courts and judges throughout the Middle East are largely absent in immigrant Muslim communities... even the legal importance of religious... opinion issued by learned judges and *muftis*, which has been greatly restricted as a result of law reform in the Middle East, is reasserted in these immigrant communities (1984:195).

From my own experience, I have heard a Sikh male elder explain why young Sikh women cannot have the same freedom as young men to mix with locals as Australians do: Women, he said, 'tarnish more easily'.

In examining the cultural construction of race, then, we need to examine thoroughly the associated notions of nation and national identity and their interrelationship with gender difference and inequality. As the spotlight shines upon the family as *the* reproductive unit both in political rhetoric and sociobiological discourse, women's central position as breeder locates us at the point of transmission of cultural values and of cultural difference. This has implications for women that are worth exploring much further if we wish to assert and maintain our autonomy and challenge patriarchal conceptions of ourselves and others.

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