Multicultural Australia

— Fact, Fiction or Aspiration?

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MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA - FACT, FICTION OR ASPIRATION?

By John McLaren,
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The heat of recent controversy in Australia about the meaning and value of multiculturalism in education, in history and in society at large is an indication of the tenacity with which a dominant culture, in this case that of British Australia, clings to its privileges.

While this tenacity may in part be attributed to the relationship between this culture and the economic power to which it gives access and by which its dominance is maintained, the ferocity of the debate suggests deeper insecurities which any questioning of received myths threatens to expose. Thus, Mr Hugh Morgan's opposition to Aboriginal land rights can easily be explained by Western Mining's desire to turn Australia into a quarry, but his apparent belief that if we acknowledge the violence of white settlement or validity of Aboriginal spiritual beliefs we are jeopardising the survival of both the nation and Christianity demands psychological rather than economic explanation.

Yet the fear displayed by British Australians at the slightest challenge to their security provides a measure of the cultural violence which has been wreaked by the dominant culture on those whole cultures it has denied, isolated and repressed. If the towers of Collins Street shiver at the muted blast of a multicultural trumpet, how much greater must be the fear and anger

of those who, from their first day at school, are taught that their languages, their religions, even their parents, are of no value, and that their only choice is to deny these or to remain throughout their lives on the margins of society.

The possible responses of a society to this situation have been outlined by J.J. Smolicz and M.J. Secombe in a paper in Mosaic or Melting Pot, edited by Philip R. de Lacy and Millicent E. Poole (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Sydney, 1979). The responses vary from external pluralism, whereby each group maintains its individuality while entering into general social or economic relationships with members of other groups, to dominant monism, through internal pluralism, where individuals choose different cultural systems in different situations, to a single cultural synthesis drawing on all constituent cultures and a monistic culture absorbing all minority cultures in a single dominant mode.

The responses adopted depend on the attitudes of the dominant as well as of the minority groups. So if the dominant group is generally tolerant, minorities may be able to preserve through several generations cultures organised within a particular religious, social or linguistic framework. Jewish culture in Australia would be an example of this pattern. On the other hand, minorities will affect dominant cultures only as their members succeed in becoming members of the dominant group and force it to adopt some of their ways. This has happened with the Jewish culture in the United States - probably by way of the arts and entertainment - and with Irish culture in Australia, particularly

by way of the Labor movement and the legal profession. Finally, however, Scottish culture in Australia provides an example of a culture which has almost been lost as its adherents have totally accepted the values of the dominant group, and now survives largely in such residual forms as tartan patriotism and the Anglophilic calvinism of a Malcolm Fraser.

The characteristic attitude of Australia's dominant culture towards minorities has been reminiscent of Marcuse's notion of repressive tolerance. We have been prepared to adapt new habits in such marginal areas as eating or drinking, the intonations and rhythms of our speech have, I suspect, been changed, we have learned not to get upset at watching crowds flock to such strange sports as soccer or hearing strange languages in the shops. But we have not felt a need to learn these languages for ourselves. And, with migration now coinciding with unemployment and coming from other than the traditional sources, even this limited tolerance has worn thin and voices are heard asserting the need to impose a single culture on everyone.

The most articulate and apparently reasonable of these voices speaking in the name of the old dominance is that of Geoffrey Blainey. His book, All for Australia, is offered as a simple assertion of the need to be honest about our migration policies, to admit that these policies do discriminate between different nationalities, and to urge that questions of the level and composition of our intake of migrants should be publicly debated

in terms of the contribution they will make to our economy and national cohesion.

Yet beneath this superficial rationality Blainey's book is deeply confused and even deceptive. He seems to be offering three basic propositions - that migration in a time of depression is uneconomic and leads to social tension, that Asian migration is destroying our ethnic balance, and that multiculturalism is endangering our national traditions. Further, he argues that our present immigration policies have been imposed on us by a conspiracy involving politicians who have entered into bipartisan agreement, bureaucrats who are secretive or misleading about policies actually followed and their numerical consequences, and the media, which avoid questioning or debating the policy. But the book continually confuses these strands of argument, slipping from one to another in ways which create heat rather than light.

Thus, in Chapter Two, where he traces the development of the controversy he inaugurated, he argues that his growing doubts about immigration policies co-incided with the onset of depression and unemployment. ". . . now we were experiencing the most serious depression for half a century, and we were actually bringing in migrants on the large scale. This policy did not make sense. Why should the unemployed be forced to suffer additional competition for jobs?" (p.23). The apparent reasonableness of this question masks his failure to discuss statistics which show that both gross and net immigration has declined as unemployment has grown. But the underlying reason for his concern emerges a

little later, when he quotes from his Warrnambool speech which began the whole affair. "In a time of large unemployment, any immigration program has to be handled with skill and care . . . An increasing proportion of Australians seem to be resentful of the large numbers of Vietnamese and other south-east Asians who are being brought in, have little chance of gaining work, and are living - through no fault of their own - at taxpayers' expense." (p.25). This slide from the economic to the racial argument is repeated through the book, as are the charges that the immigrants are living at our expense - often intensified to suggest that they are living very well at our expense: "To be on the dole in Australia was like paradise compared to working hard in Indo-China. To find a well-paid job in Australia doubled the joys of paradise. The refugee program also favoured Asians, for we brought refugees from Indo-China rather than other regions in the troubled world. That many refugees were not really refugees was simply one of the risks of any humanitarian or supposedly humanitarian policy" (p.107). This is in a chapter which argues that the government is using high-sounding declarations of humanitarian principle to cover a policy of discrimination in favour of Asia - "The Government appeals to high principles in public and ignores them in practice" (p.102).

The same confusion governs Blainey's treatment of cultural issues. So he argues that the "majority of Australians are now paying the price of a policy that is eager to please each ethnic minority at the expense of the great majority", and asks, reasonably, "If the people of each minority should have the right to establish here a

way of life familiar to them, is it not equally right - or more so, in democracy - for the majority of Australians to retain the way of life familiar to them?" (p.124). Again, this general proposition is quickly narrowed to the phenomenon of Asian settlement, as he quotes two anonymous correspondents complaining that "With each passing week the town of Cabramatta is becoming more and more like an Asian town" (p.125) and that "the sky is filled with greasy smoke and the smell of goat's meat" (p.132). He specifically distinguishes these Asian communities from those formed by earlier European immigrants: "The same process did not happen in the 1950s and 1960s. There was virtually full employment then: the newcomers' culture was not different; and the ghettoes were neither as tight nor as large" (p.123). Yet he has just used the examples of a "Little Greece, a Little Italy" where "each minority has the maximum chance to live the life and follow the social customs of their homeland" (p.123) as instances of that noble theory of multiculturalism for which we all pay.

Yet Blainey's examples point to a real problem. People do feel threatened if the character of their neighbourhood is changed by forces outside their control, and Blainey is accurate in identifying the contradication enacted by people who advocate multiculturalism while living in comfortable surburbs which they are able to protect by using their political and economic power. He points out that gentrification has already transformed neighbourhoods against the interests of their earlier residents, and he complains that the beneficiaries of this process now wish to transform other suburbs into ethnic ghettoes to the

disadvantage of the same classes of the powerless that they have already dispossessed from the inner city. Yet he fails to notice the true parallel, which is that it is the weak who suffer, whether they are migrants forced to live in the areas least adaptable to their needs or the older inhabitants who lack the means to play an active role in social change. The solution is the opposite to his implicit suggestion that we should freeze social change - it is that more money should be spent on immigrants by linking a settlement and employment scheme to the immigration scheme, and that at the same time proper systems of income support and public housing should ensure that established residents are not displaced by economic factors.

If Blainey uses economic arguments to disguise his fear of Asian migration, he endeavours to conceal his hostility to the whole concept of multiculturalism by drawing a careful distinction between the most recent wave of immigrants, who are economically undesirable, and earlier waves who contributed to national prosperity and became assimilated within our national culture. Yet his true feelings keep breaking through.

His earliest doubts are expressed in a quotation from a public lecture he gave early in 1982: "It would be interesting to know how much the present call for a multicultural Australia, for the positive airing of cultural differences, comes from the migrants themselves and how much from politicians or people like you and me who think we know what the migrants would like" (p.22). Nevertheless, he puts himself in the position of the reasonable

man who is willing to take the best from all possible worlds. "I support Asian immigration and the coming of refugees; I support multiculturalism if it is moderate, tolerant and articulate, rather than rabid and woolly and divisive" (p.32). As we read the book we become aware, however, that these objectives are a fair description of his views of current policies of multiculturalism, which he believes are being foisted on the community by people hostile to Britain and to our traditional way of life. "The policy has largely been imposed from above. At first it seemed to be mostly words, packaging, oratory, pork-barrelling and folk-dancing" scarcely suggests an open-minded attitude on the part of its author. The multiculturalists are associated with the "pro-Asian lobby" (p.32) in bringing about the change in immigration policies. They include not only politicians and bureaucrats, but the "salaried, white-collar, jet-setting executives of the ACTU and big unions" and the "high-ranking trade unionists and intellectuals of the Left" who see " 'Racism' as a device, a capitalist trick, to divide the labour force" (pp.11-12).

Blainey explicitly identifies multiculturalism as being anti-British (pp.96, 108, 114), and in turn identifies British, or Anglo-Celtic, with what is best in our tradition and with those elements or factors which promote national identity. "The multi-cultural policy, and its emphasis on what is different and on the rights of the new minority rather than the old majority, gnaws at that sense of solidarity that many people crave for. The policy of governments since 1978 to turn Australia into a land of all nations runs across the present yearning for stability and social

cohesion" (p.153). This sense, he argues, is shared by "the children of Estonian, Ukrainian, Dutch, German, Italian, Yugoslav and other European immigrants", but may be lost if "people from very different cultures are encouraged to come and, as far as possible, to maintain their own cultures. Most of the vital characteristics of Australia - democratic government, freedom of speech, freedom to worship - are not common in Asia or the Third World. If immigration from the Third World is too rapid, it may well impose pressures on democratic institutions" (p.154). One might well ask whether the absence of these freedoms in several of the European countries he mentions, as well as in the Third World, was not a factor in the decision to migrate. Yet such a question would miss the issue, for despite the careful qualifications the drift of his argument is quite plain - Europeans can assimilate into our traditions, provided they are not distracted by the lures of multiculturalism, whereas Asians cannot. Thus his book is a warning against a policy which he claims, by a fantastic manipulation of hypothetical figures, threatens to make Australia "an Asian nation" (p.119), and against the policies of multiculturalism which are destroying our national cohesion and so allowing the threat to become a reality,

One particular consequence of multiculturalism he attacks is the "decline in the emphasis on the English language", which he alleges has followed from the "rise of the multiculturalists and their sweeping success in Canberra" (p.55). His evidence for this is a decision to place less emphasis on a knowledge of English as a qualification for entry to Australia as a migrant, but the

requirement is in itself of fairly recent date. He argues correctly that "To have little knowledge of the key language in a democracy is to be deprived: the democracy also becomes less a democracy. Many immigrants who command little English are also economically deprived" (p.5). He then takes the Turkish community in Melbourne as a particular example of this deprivation. Unfortunately, he makes no attempt to examine the history of language policies in Australia, and thus fails to note that Australia's postwar migration scheme ran for over 20 years before the then Mr. Phillip Lynch, as Minister for Immigration, introduced a Commonwealth policy to provide English teaching for school children who did not have English as their mother tongue. The present programs of community languages are ultimately a product of that program, and of the realisation which it produced that we cannot afford to deprive children of the opportunity of cognitive development while we wait for them to learn a second language. There is also evidence that helping them to develop their mother tongue will provide a sounder basis for acquiring fluency in English.

The most important consequence of the language policies now being developed is their effect on the dominant culture, which hitherto has been determined by monolingual. While it may never be either possible or desirable for a country like Australia to follow the English model and develop a single language synthesised from all its sources, it is possible to develop to the third stage of the Smolicz and Secombe model, whereby each individual would command at least two of the languages which contribute to our total

linguistic culture and be able to use whichever best fitted a particular situation. Rather than the role of English being diminished in such a multilingual community, it would be enhanced, as it would become the public, unifying language to which all had access, rather than an exclusive privilege to be conferred by right of birth and education.

Blainey's book rests on the assumption that the dominant Anglo-Celtic culture is itself cohesive and that its ascendancy in Australia has developed the best of all possible worlds, and that any further change and adaptation in Australia can only be so slow as to be almost imperceptible. He thus ignores the fact that both in Britain itself and in the colonies this culture and the institutions it supports have always been the possession of the few, and that British societies have commonly been torn by class, religious and racial divisions. Multiculturalism offers old Australians, including such groups as the descendants of the Barossa, Wimmera and Lockyer Germans, the opportunity to understand better the culture which has dominated them, and thus to recover for themselves the past they choose and participate in making a broader future for their own children. Ironically, in so doing they will be perpetuating an aspect of British culture which Blainey and the establishment ignore, but which has always been its greatest strength - the ability to change, assimilate and grow. As Defoe put it, "We have been Europe's sink, the jakes where she voids all her offal outcast progeny." Defoe intended his phrase as high praise, and we might well consider that out own

proudest destiny is to be the jakes, not only of Europe, but of the world.

Blainey is correct when he claims that the present immigration policy has changed utterly from that envisaged by Arthur Calwell and his supporters in 1946. As Janis Wilton and Richard Bosworth point out in Old Worlds and New Australia (Penguin, 215p., illus., index, $8.95, 0 14 007017 6), the postwar immigration policy was motivated by fear of Asia and was implemented in the belief that, although we might accept a few refugees and others from Europe, these would be outmatched by ten to one by those from Britain (p.11). As we know, this did not occur, and despite prejudice our population balance and the nature of our culture has been transformed. The policy succeeded because politicians, amongst others, were prepared to lead public opinion rather than wait for it or, worse, pander to it in the name of free debate. The Blainey thesis is that we should not make decisions about public policy until we know and accept the consequences. One lesson of the postwar migration is that we cannot know the ultimate consequences, and that debate of issues in such terms is inevitably misleading. Another is that the policy can be a success where we have attended to immediate consequences, such as in housing and employment, and a failure in such areas as language policy where we have avoided action.

In the long run, however, the success of minority cultures in maintaining their vigour as sources from which individuals can draw their own patterns of behavior will depend on the attitudes

of members of the dominant culture. If they remain exclusive, trusting unquestioningly in their own traditions, they will condemn members of minority cultures to choose between isolation in the ghetto, deracination in the establishment, or a duality in which neither part of their life enriches the other. On the other hand, if they recognise the differences and tensions existing within the dominant culture itself they lessen its exclusivity and widen the choices available to everybody. This is essentiallly what Les Murray has done in his poetry, which creates its own tradition from a blend of Australian, British and cosmopolitan traditions. Thus he asserts rural values against urban, vernacular against high culture, republican forms against royal, his native Scottish against establishment English antecedents and an adopted catholicism against his family's calvinism.

His latest book of essays, Persistence in Folly (Angus and Robertson, 183p., pb., 0 207 14948 8) deals with these issues directly, particularly in its major essay, 'The Human Hair Thread', which can be read as a companion to his poems on the theme of tradition, and again in 'The Bonnie Disproportion', but they provide context or content for virtually every essay in the book, which as a whole can be read as the ideological justification for his poetic explorations.

'The Human Hair Thread' is the most audacious essay in the volume, for in it he virtually seeks to appropriate the Aboriginal tradition for himself and incorporate it in the rural culture with which he grew up. The kinship which he asserts is based not on

genetic inheritance but on a common allegiance to the land which has shaped both cultures. Murray does not sentimentalise the actual relationships between black and white in the district from which he came, but he does claim that the tensions are outweighed by the shared relationships created by land and work (and, incidentally, often deepened by shared if unacknowledged genetic relationships as well). He is aware of the danger of taking another people's culture in this way, but defends himself with the claim that artistic borrowing leaves the lender no poorer, and may make him richer by restoring his self-confidence in an inheritance which may otherwise be lost by neglect. This is true only insofar as the borrower does not so misuse his borrowings as to make them unavailable to the culture from which they were created. The twin dangers in the use of Aboriginal motifs are that the people will be shorn of their mythic and historic dimensions by being treated just as neighbours, or alternatively be removed from factuality by being turned into creatures of awesome but distant myth. Murray's writing approaches but succeeds in skating around both of these dangers.

Murray's use of Aboriginal themes is important, however, not merely because it starts to do justice to the dispossessed but because it looks to a fact which is common to all Australians but usually concealed by the dominant Anglophile culture. The fact we share is a ruptured relationship with the land. This relationship is incomplete on the side of the newcomers because we have not come to terms with our acts of dispossession, and thus can behave only with the hubris of conquerors instead of with the confidence

of those who are owned by the land. It is incomplete for the Aborigines because their dispossession has not been acknowledged, and thus they cannot be free in their land. The problem of landrights is therefore not merely one of justice, but must be solved before any legitimate Australian culture can come fully into being. Until then, we are not even in the stage of independent cultures, but are moving among separate cultures which can only remain individually imcomplete.

Similarly, the problem of a multicultural society owing allegiance to a common environment but to different origins is one of legitimacy. Like the white minority in South Africa, we may find it more comfortable to deny the validity of those traditions we do not share individually, but as long as we exclude any settler from full rights of particulation on her own terms in our wider culture we deny the claims of our own part of that culture to legitimacy. We should bear in mind also that, just as the fact of settlement ruptured the Aboriginal bond with the environment, so the facts of migration, industrialisation and urbanisation have ruptured this bond for our white settlers, ever since, to use Les Murray's terms, England chose to use its own poor and dispossessed to populate its southern Gulag.

None of this is to deny that some cultural values may be superior to others, but such superiority can be determined only on the basis of full and free dialogue between members of the different cultures. Such dialogue implies that each person has a right to learn both his own language and culture and that of at least some

other members of society, without the implication that either is established and thus superior, or by definition inferior. Similarly, the assertion of a partnership of all cultures as a desirable goal does not imply that at all times we must have absolutely free immigration from any source. Migration policies are linked to but separate from cultural policies, and must be varied from time to time according to economic circumstances and the needs of the source countries as well as the host country. The constant goal of both policies should, however, always be an expansion rather than a contraction of our community. Only in such a way can we be true to all our traditions.

To sum up, then: multicultural Australia is a fact, even if we wish to deny it; it is merely a fiction to say that we understand the meaning or implications of this fact; the development of a multicultural society in which all parts are equally valued and from which the individual can draw his own values is a necessary aspiration if we are to establish the legitimacy of any part of Australian society.

MULTICULTURAL STUDIES AT FOOTSCRAY INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Background

The increased rate of participation in senior secondary and tertiary education in the industrialized world coupled with the doubling of the population since the Second World War have produced the growth of dozens of tertiary educational institutions in Australia.

The only such institution to develop in the region west of the city of Melbourne to date has been the Footscray Institute of Technology. Degree courses beyond the original technological areas were quickly developed and flourished.

Arts degrees in Urban Studies and Australian Cultural Studies were introduced by the Department of Humanities but it became apparent that the high concentration of migrant populations in the area made the introduction of community languages an imperative. It was decided that while the languages taught would be available as electives in the established courses, a new degree structure focussing specifically on the migrant presence in Australia was required.

Course Objectives

Students are to be provided with both sociocultural understanding and linguistic training.

In the first area migration to Australia is examined from an historical introduction, moving on to sociolinguistic, sociological and political aspects of the migration experience.

The language goals are adjusted according to the various intakes. Provision is made for students with some knowledge of the language to proceed immediately to advanced studies. On completing a major these students can expect to become language teachers at school level or for adults.

Students with little or no knowledge of the language may also enrol. They are provided with a beginner's course. Only exceptional students will in the three year course attain sufficient proficiency to teach the language. The majority of those who complete the major should have sufficient grasp of the language to deal with social situations met by welfare workers in government and private agencies.

Those students who find their language skills unequal to the task of completing the major are permitted to cease the language studies at the end of the second year. They will take away from the course an appreciation of the richness and complexity of language study and a tolerance and understanding of those whose grasp of English is limited.

Degree Structure

(a) Compulsory Major - Intercultural Studies

First Year:

Australian Cultural History; Language and Culture (half unit); two of: Greek/Italian/Maltese/Vietnamese Culture Studies (two quarter units).

Second Year:

Language and Australian Society (half unit); Institutional Responses to Immigration and Settlement (half unit); Australian Social Structure and Culture.

Third Year:

Research Methodology (half unit); Comparative Ethnic Studies (half unit); Research Project.

(b) Language Major (Greek, Italian, Macedonian, Vietnamese currently available)

Advanced level: Six units required.

Beginner's level: Four or six units.

Languages not available at the Institute may be studied elsewhere by arrangement.

(c) Elective Major (or submajor and two floating units)

Six further units of which at least four must constitute a submajor must be taken.

If only four units of language are taken, a full major must be completed in the third area of study. Elective studies to major level may be taken within the Humanities Department in Geography, History, Literature, Politics, Sociology or Urban Studies. A major in Recreation Studies and submajors in Economics and Drama are available in various other Departments of the Institute.