Multiculturalism: The Politics of Cultural Diversity

This paper addresses the proposition that multiculturalism in Australia is not primarily a cultural phenomenon but should be understood, rather, as being framed by local demographico-political considerations, by a set of strategies of nation formation, and by the politics of Asian regionalism. By this I don’t mean that it has no cultural effects, both at the level of high culture and of everyday social interactions, but that it cannot be accounted for in terms of the discourse of cultural attitude with which it is officially described.

More precisely, I consider the evolution of Australian multiculturalism within the following political contexts:

1. Australia’s demography has been strongly inflected by post-war migration from the United Kingdom, southern Europe, and more recently Asia, especially Indochina. The political problem set for government has been that of managing ethnic diversity within a framework of a traditional and still dominant monoculture, together with a racism that was entrenched in immigration controls in the form of the White Australia Policy until the end of the 1960s. The challenge of cultural reform was taken up by the Fraser government in the late 1970s and more emphatically by the Labour governments of Hawke and Keating from the early 1980s. In both cases these reforms were understood primarily as an opportunity to develop a new political constituency, and to do so without alienating traditional white voters. Its implementation as policy took place through a liberal rhetoric of tolerance and an array of new institutional structures.
2. The precondition for such a politics of cultural pluralism, however, is that, unlike New Zealand which has a substantial indigenous minority population; unlike the United States, which has a substantial non-integrated minority population of former slaves; and unlike Canada or Switzerland or Malaysia or Fiji, which have substantial ethnic and linguistic divisions, Australia has substantial racial, linguistic and cultural unity. Cultural diversity can be freely tolerated precisely because of the absence of challenge, except symbolically, to the hegemony of the dominant anglo-celtic culture. (But I should note in passing the obvious tension within this convenient fiction of a singular “anglo-celtic” formation: the unity of a class compromise is built upon a history of struggle and division.)

3. The major exception to this cultural homogeneity is the survival of a culturally weakened and economically marginalized indigenous population. Lacking political power themselves, Australian Aborigines have nevertheless figured crucially, as an unresolved contradiction, in the symbolic politics of cultural diversity. They fit uneasily into received notions of multiculturalism, and indeed have frequently refused to accept the model as applying to themselves, because of their structurally different relation to the Australian polity: they are the conquered original inhabitants, not a community of immigrants like all other ethnic groups. They have thus been the object of a different set of policies, moving in part but by no means completely away from a previous ethos of assimilation towards the goal of granting a very limited degree of self-governance to Aboriginal communities and providing access to the basic conditions of modernity. But because of indigenous peoples’ very restricted ability to make trouble for Government, these policies have been poorly and halfheartedly implemented; much of the political running has been taken up by the Supreme Court’s recent recognition in its Mabo decision of surviving indigenous rights in land. At a symbolic level, by contrast, indigenous culture pervades the rhetoric of national identity. Aboriginal artwork is to be found on banknotes, in the chambers of Parliament, and in corporate boardrooms. This tension between economic and social marginality and cultural valorization is a crucial one for the meaning and the workings of Australian multiculturalism.

4. The concept of multiculturalism maps out a distinctive alternative to the previously dominant model of Australian national identity formulated in the 1890s and based in homosocial solidarity (the mythology of “mate-
ship”), in racism, egalitarianism, and residual Englishness. The principle of a cultural inclusiveness which is tolerant of internal diversity forms the basis of a model of citizenship which is “modern” (or even “postmodern”) in a number of important senses: it proclaims that class struggle is an anachronism within a society structured by a corporate mutuality of interests; that hierarchies of gender and race have no place in a properly functioning polity and economy; and that a primary social value is to be given to education in the context of an economy directed towards knowledge-based industrial production rather than primary production or skills-based heavy industry. The good citizen is thus an educated corporate citizen rather than a member of a closed and self-protective group. He or she is open to social and cultural difference, not for its own sake but because of its congruence with strategic goals at a number of different levels, from personal self-realization through to the imperatives of international trade.

5. Multicultural national identity is thus an integral part of a broader politics of national formation which is about fifteen years old and is largely but not exclusively identified with the Labour Party. This politics is built upon a post-Fordist vision of the revitalization of Australian industry through development of the population’s knowledge and skills base; an orientation to high technology; the aggressive development of new markets, especially in the Asian region; and the achievement of slogans like “international competitiveness” and “international best practice” through new forms of discipline of labour (which include, importantly, labour’s active collaboration in this politics of national formation). The prevalent rhetoric of micro-economic reform is code for a wholesale transformation of the conditions of work: weakening industrial award conditions by bringing them into line with global conditions (that is, with the world’s least protected labour markets); protecting Australian living standards by adding value to work through its knowledge component; and accepting the resultant decline in the quantity of available work.

6. In this context the word “culture” takes on a new breadth of meaning in such phrases as “work culture,” “export culture,” “culture of competition,” “research culture,” and so on. The symbolic domain becomes central to economic transformation, rather than being a reflex of it. No longer a matter of food and folk-dancing, the concept of culture takes on its full force as the underlying conditions of possibility of work. But if this move gives a new seriousness to cultural activity in its broadest sense, it
still doesn’t remove it from a teleology in which economic finalities remain determinant.

7. At the same time, the cultural domain becomes subject to a series of policy measures relating to “equity”: the egalitarian is redefined from its homosocial context to a broader ethos of fairness which puts questions of gender and of ethnic tolerance at its centre. From being a party of resistance to or at least control of the effects of capital, the Labour Party becomes the advocate of a fairness which has no economic content, and which thus works to defuse the traditional forms of struggle over underlying socioeconomic inequalities.

8. In a narrower sense of the word, the concept of multiculturalism refers to a politics of national identity which redefines the nation by way of opposition to England (and the monarchy) and of identification with the Asian or Asia-Pacific region. The move towards proclamation of a republic, which has a symbolic rather than a political imperative (and which draws in part on the complex relations between the “Anglo” and the “Celtic” — the English and the Irish heritages — within Australia’s dominant cultural bloc), focuses a shift which has been underway since World War II towards two different orientations: towards Asia in terms of trading relations, and towards the United States in terms of geopolitical alliance. Its rhetoric of national autonomy, of course, fails to address Australia’s military reliance on the latter and the general weakening of the nation state in relation to international capital — something that’s by no means unique to Australia. Nor does it address questions of cultural dependence, and particularly the extent to which Australian popular culture is dominated by imported American material.

9. Although Australia’s ethnic minorities are still predominantly European rather than Asian, the priorities of trade have significantly skewed the focus of cultural identification to Asia. Again, this is very much a matter of governmental rhetoric, the attempt to bring about cultural change by means of long-term policy. Perhaps the best example of this shift is in the teaching of foreign languages in secondary schools, where Indonesian, Japanese and Chinese have tended to displace both the traditional languages of “high” culture (French, German, Latin) and the so-called “community” languages (Italian, Greek, Vietnamese). These reforms have been less than sweeping, however, because of the general weakness of foreign-language teaching in Australian schools. The notion of an Australian identification with Asia is caught up in the paradox that
it works against the grain of an entrenched Orientalist understanding of "Asia" that overlays a supposed cultural unity on a supposed racial unity. If this newly found identification is to mean something more than the banality of a geographical situation, it must have some sense of what constitutes cultural Asianness, yet it must do so in a way that doesn't preclude Australia's own largely European cultural traditions, and it must mean something more than the ability to manage chopsticks. It's not yet clear what this something more might be.

10. What counts as "culture" in multiculturalism? For me the most important areas are those in which the policy has arguably been least effective: the areas of institutional interaction where cultural difference should have had most to contribute. I'm thinking, on the one hand, of institutions such as the system of parliamentary government, the media, the law, the education system, architecture and town planning, and agriculture, none of which, it seems to me, has been substantially changed by or have drawn inspiration from the experience of migrants who have grown up with very different models of what government is, or what a town should look like, or how the law should work. On the other hand, these institutions have for the most part done little to accommodate the demands of cultural diversity: multiculturalism virtually never means multilingualism, and the courts, the schools and the hospitals do little to cater for cultural and linguistic difference. It is presently unthinkable that there should be a real plurality of working languages.

11. The unspoken assumption of the policy framework is that the value of cultural diversity is always to be balanced against the overriding value of social cohesion. The stronger version of such a balance is perhaps India, with its constant danger of shifting from a delicately poised multiculturalism to a state of communally divided biculturalism. The models of imbalance are those of a cultural division become specular and murderous: Rwanda, Bosnia, Northern Ireland. The assumption is a comforting one insofar as it favours and reinforces an apparently given cultural consensus, which thus need never be defined.

12. This fiction of consensus means that the hard questions about the limits of cultural relativism are rarely posed (or else they are posed within a racist discourse, and thus become doubly difficult to articulate within public debate). Should the practice of clitoridectomy be tolerated within Australia, and if we think (as I do) that it should not, what justifies this imposition of one, mainstream set of ethical values over another, minority
set? Should a court make an allowance, in sentencing a man for the murder of his unmarried and pregnant daughter, for his strongly held traditional views on what constitutes family dishonour? Such questions make it clear that tolerance of diversity reaches its limits at the very point where cultural difference starts to have real consequences.

13. Perhaps the most forceful impact of the doctrine of multiculturalism has been felt in the area of aesthetic production. A relevant dimension of policy here has been the growth of a new managerialism in the arts which has overseen, amongst other things, the deliberate (if often tokenistic) fostering of a politics of ethnic difference. Multiculturalism has been an important category in the funding of the high arts through the Australia Council, but its most spectacular achievement was the setting up—for the most cynical of political motives—of what is arguably the world’s finest television channel, the Special Broadcasting Service, which has the brief of catering directly to the needs of Australia’s ethnic communities.

14. Let me finish by pointing briefly to the two ways in which I think Australian multiculturalism (I’m not able to talk at all about New Zealand) might carry a more general theoretical interest. First, in a purely political sense it seems to me to have been, within very strict limits, a successful policy—which it is not to say that it has yet been adequately implemented. In the symbolic terms which are its most important dimension it constitutes a systematic reform of manners which has produced a more attractive, more tolerant and more open model of Australian society than its xenophobic predecessors. Second, for theorists of culture it happens to coincide with a move that is central to poststructuralist theorization: the displacement of a politics of identity predicated on the self-identical subject or social group by a politics of hybridity, of mixity, of non-self-identity. Multiculturalism can of course cut both ways, conceiving of social groups and social subjects as being defined by the identity and the homogeneity of the ethnos; in its broader configuration, however, it is about the simultaneous self-sameness and self-difference of the ethnoi, the mixing of the separate peoples in a hybrid state.