

All in the same boat

David McKnight

Last December's riots in Sydney's south raised once again the ongoing controversy over Australia's version of multiculturalism. Here David McKnight argues that 1970s multiculturalism, whatever its strengths then, needs to be revisited and revised to allow for a stronger affirmation of our common humanity.

Universalism

Trying to understand politics through a traditional Right-to-Left spectrum is increasingly misleading. For example, today it is the ideas of the cultural Left which are founded on cultural identity, and which champion diversity as a basis for politics. On the other hand, the dominant neo-liberal Right trumpets a world of globalised commodities purchased in an anonymous market by peoples whose cultural identity is giving way to a universal consumer identity.

This is a reversal of the traditional philosophical positions of Right and Left. The traditional Left's theoretical and practical adherence to social justice, equality and socialism in various forms was based on a philosophical universalism. It saw all people as equal without significant difference. The Left's world view was based on the universality of labour rather than on the value of diversity of ethnic minorities, women, gays, and so on. American leftist Todd Gitlin notes this reversal, and argues that the traditional Left believed that 'the overwhelming majority of human beings were united by their participation in labor. That was their 'identity'. But unlike the race, gender, sexual and other birthright identities of today, this membership was ecumenical. Open to anyone who migrated, or fell, into the proletariat.'¹

It was within this universalistic world view that the traditional socialist Left once championed the equality and rights of ethnic minorities and women. Part of this world view stemmed from the rational ideals of the Enlightenment, while another part sprang from Marxism's opposition to imperialism and colonialism. For example, in Australia it was the traditional Left, together with a number of Christians, who were the practical champions of Indigenous people from the 1930s

onwards. Overseas, it was the Left which welcomed and often led the anti-colonial revolts – driven by nationalism – in Africa and Asia from the 1950s to the 1970s.

By contrast, it was the classical Right which was fundamentally founded on ethnos, and believed in the differences and particularism of race and nation. The deep foundations of the Right of Europe lay in the pillars of the nation: the church; the mandarins of the state and the law; the landed aristocracy; the military officer caste; the monarchy; and, above all, the propertied middle class which both symbolically and actually owned a large chunk of the nation. The classical conservative Right was an 'ethnic Right', with its reflex posture being xenophobic nationalism and suspicion of other nations. This classical conservative component of the Right tended not to believe in such abstractions as the universal rights of man.

An intellectual precursor of the Right was French aristocrat Joseph de Maistre. In the wake of the French Revolution and its ringing declaration about the 'Rights of Man', de Maistre argued: 'In the course of my life I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians. I even know, thanks to Montesquieu, that one can be a Persian: but Man, I declare, I have never met in my life; if he exists he is unknown to me.' In other words, humans as some abstract entity or essence do not exist outside their culture. They are entirely, as some say today, 'culturally constructed', and this was classically defined in mystical terms such as 'blood'.

By the 1990s, however, this Right-Left spectrum had swung on its axis. The Left was the first to change. Young intellectual leftists of the 1970s, faced with the inadequacy of socialism to explain society, made the 'cultural turn' by rightly acknowledging cultural identity as central to human experience and rightly accusing the old Left of being so utterly in love with

Enlightenment rationality and the capital–labour contradiction that it failed to recognise this and other significant dimensions of life, politics and social change. But this recognition came at a price. The new cultural Left combined its insights with a philosophical opposition to universalism, and made a fetish of cultural identity. It celebrated the variety of cultures, tended to romanticise such feelings, and saw them as laudably ‘oppositional’ to the dominant culture.

The consequence of this has been a deep alienation of the cultural Left from the mainstream culture—not surprisingly, since this is seen to be the oppressive norm—and the cultivation of marginality. In turn, this has meant that much of the cultural Left not only finds it hard to communicate with the bulk of people of Anglo-Celtic-origin in Australia, but sees no role for such people in shaping the kind of cultural transformation it would like to see occur. The role of the Anglo-Celtic majority is simply to smile, step aside and be passive. The main message to this group is: you must celebrate other people’s cultures. In the 1980s and 1990s, the cultural Left often promoted well-intended government programs favouring cultural diversity, which contributed to the populist, anti-government revolt against what it calls ‘multiculturalism’.

This loss of the universalist component of the Left has meant that the cultural Left often finds it hard to talk about politics in terms of an overall vision, a national interest or a common good. It has little to say to society as a whole, but in its own fragmentation addresses a series of separate constituencies. Yet it is on the broad, national field that cultural changes are played out. The cultural Left positions itself on the sidelines and is then frustrated by its inability to change society as a whole.

Multiculturalism and its troubles

Multiculturalism is often articulated on the Left as an ‘oppositional’ concept, undermining the constraints of the dominant culture. Because of this, those espousing a multicultural stance rarely qualify or make conditional the application of

the concept. If a group insists on a demand in the name of cultural diversity or respect, who can say whether the limits of acceptable diversity have been reached, and on what basis?

Multiculturalism therefore poses, but does not answer, the highly charged question about how to resolve competing and antagonistic cultural values, particularly in relation to families, marriage and the treatment of women and children. In practice, such questions are usually settled by reference to Australian law, which favours individual over group rights. But the public debate over the limits of cultural diversity

is not ‘settled’ so easily. The pressure to legitimise group rights over the rights of individual women and children is one little-recognised source of hostility to multiculturalism.

Emphasising the rights and particularities of groups usually comes at the expense of emphasising what all groups share, whether that is expressed in terms of the national interest, or social cohesion and trust. One high profile supporter of multiculturalism who recognised this some time ago was the West Australian academic Laksiri Jayasuriya. He argued for a ‘paradigm shift’ from what he called ‘cultural pluralism to democratic pluralism’.² He argued that the official recognition of cultural diversity in the early 1970s rested on a ‘largely hidden belief in eventual integration’.

One of the critical problems for this approach ‘has been to demarcate with any degree of consensus the precise limits of cultural pluralism in relation to policy initiatives such as ethnic media, schools and services’. That is, the idea was fuzzy. Nevertheless, the policy worked especially in catering to the needs of first-generation migrants. But other research, he has argued, showed that in the second and third generations, inter-ethnic

marriage meant that ethnic boundaries were becoming more fluid and a ‘mixed’ cultural society was developing, rather than a multi-cultural one. In this situation, a more symbolic ethnic identity developed which involved ‘a loose nostalgia for one’s historic origins but no compelling sense of identification or group loyalty’.³ A similar notion is expressed by the secretary of the British Fabian Society, Sunder Katwala, in an article



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titled 'Why I'm Proud to be a Mongrel Brit'. The son of an Indian father and Irish mother, he argues that

...multiculturalism has not valued integration enough. Retreating to ethnic enclaves – demanding our own share of recognition and resources as Gujeratis, Somalis, Bangladeshis and so on – is a dead end. We need a shared society. Integration is a two-way street. We should demand allegiance and loyalty from citizens – and tackle the racism in employment which prevents the promise of integration from being kept.⁴

Both these writers anticipate the need to promote an evolving, hybridised cultural identity which can accommodate both cultural blending and the persistence of diverse cultures, but which should occur within the framework of the values of an evolving common culture. In the absence of such a set of shared values, multiculturalism and cultural diversity are invoked by all sides as a national self-definition. The fuzziness and the 'group thinking' which allow multiculturalism to be interpreted as unlimited diversity can and did become the object of intense dislike by a section of the population by the late 1990s. Taking seriously the views of multiculturalism's critics is an important first step to preserving the positive values embedded in the idea.

A common humanity

In opposing racism it may be better to begin by emphasising the similarities between peoples—the idea of a common humanity—rather than beginning with cultural differences and calling for all sides to respect these differences. This is not an argument opposed to valuing and celebrating cultural differences, but one about the best foundations on which to build. We need to cultivate, not simply respect, but empathy across the divide of cultures. Empathy is valuable because it is a deeper commitment than mere respect, and involves a level of emotional identification with other people. Out of empathy, I believe, we are more likely to develop new, hybrid core values for our society.

Opposing racism and ethnocentrism on the basis of a common humanity also takes us into an area which is very controversial for some people. A growing scientific literature exists which gives good grounds for thinking that some form of human nature exists.⁵ This research has not settled the question, however, and the idea remains controversial. Many believe that any acknowledgment of a human nature implies acceptance of a rigid set of qualities which must exist in all humans in all times. But the kind of human nature which those who have researched it talk about is rather a set of innate tendencies whose expression is tempered by historical and cultural, as well as individual, circumstance. Critics, however, see only the changing circumstances reflecting the dominance of what might be called the 'social science world view', which looks only for social and cultural reasons for the way we are.

Nevertheless, even among social scientists, there is widespread agreement that humans are social creatures, meaning that they prefer to live in groups and are not naturally solitary. These social groups are, specifically, families and local communities. For much of human history, these communities often consisted of a number of extended families which intermarried. Today, what we call ethnic groups are very large groups of extended families, as the Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker argues. Ultimately, these ethnic groups grow and sometimes become nations, who are bonded by a common feeling of identity and loyalty. Pinker believes, along with others, that there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that the human mind evolved over a million years in the context of survival in small clan groups, and that as a result ethnocentrism is a human universal.⁶

Acknowledging that a disposition to ethnic identification is one element of a human nature has implications for political visions and philosophies. Basically, it means that we must accept limits on such ideas and visions. I have already argued that a fatal weakness of reforming visionaries (especially Marxists) was the misconception that humans are completely malleable and that traits such as self-interest can disappear with the 'right' kind of social structure. For similar reasons, we cannot imagine that ethnic identification will one day disappear. Social conditions will greatly shape its intensity and its expression, but it will remain in some form.

Ien Ang, a prominent Australian theorist of multiculturalism, argues that

the main long-term goal of anti-racist educational programs should be the gradual development of a general culture of what I want to call interracial trust. It may be the case that some fundamental form of racism – associated with ethnocentrism and intolerance against those who are different – is part and parcel of human nature: it is deeply embedded in the very culture of human society.⁷

It is likely that she is right. It is impossible to find a society which is not ethnocentric to some degree, but it is quite possible to find societies that display a wide variety of behaviours towards people of other ethnicities, from a murderous suspicion to a peaceful trust or even better. And societies can display both qualities at different stages in their history.

But if a disposition to ethnic identification seems to be innate, so are other dispositions and capacities which moderate such feelings. Most importantly, there is accumulating evidence that altruism or caring for others is biologically based.⁸ Perhaps not surprisingly, like ethnic identification, these capacities are also believed to be founded in humans' oldest social structure: families. Family members will routinely make sacrifices for each other to a degree that they will not repeat for non-family members.

That is to say that empathy and compassion begin as a local phenomenon. Humans experience compassion most strongly when it affects people like themselves, and they often fail

to experience it when tragedy is culturally distant. According to American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, such tendencies 'are likely to be built into the nature of compassion as it develops in childhood and then adulthood: we form intense attachments to the local first and only gradually learn to have compassion for people who are outside our own immediate circle'. Hence the tendency for compassion to stop at national borders: 'Most of us are brought up to believe that all human beings have equal worth. At least the world's major religions and secular philosophies tell us so. But our emotions don't believe it.'⁹

But Nussbaum's point is that compassion also has a reasoned element and can be educated. Compassion can move outwards from its local, family base. When it does, it begins to assume the characteristics of altruism, of empathy with others just because they are human. This also happens to have been the view of the discoverer of evolution, Charles Darwin. In the language of his time he foresaw a growing tendency for compassion to expand outwards, building on a foundation of local empathy. If the people within one nation can sympathise with the other, anonymous, members of the nation, only an 'artificial barrier' is preventing the expansion of those sympathies to the people of all nations and races.

The attempt to surmount this barrier by the policy of multiculturalism was important in its day, whatever flaws it had. In order to preserve the best values which it represented, I believe it is necessary to recognise its weaknesses and fashion new ideas embodying its strengths. In terms of fighting a culture war, it means we must project a vision about what constitutes national identity and 'Australian values', rather than denouncing such ideas and focusing on smaller cultural and identity groups. A progressive definition of national identity and values would necessarily be a synthesis of cultural values. We need a synthesis because the alternative is some version of monocultural assimilation that is neither desirable nor possible.

Such a new synthesis would inevitably draw heavily on valuable things in the existing British-originated national culture, but it would also draw traditions and values from other cultures. It would involve a set of core values and practices to which loyalty was expected, but in other areas a diversity of values would exist. To demand loyalty and to work towards social cohesion is a valuable and necessary thing when a society's core values are just and fair. Such a synthesis would be more than the formal requirements of citizenship, since citizenship alone, I believe, is too bloodless a concept. It would resemble the hybrid Australian identity which is actually slowly developing of its own accord, and it would be an identity of which we could be proud. It would be inclusive in the fullest sense of the term because it would be based on the belief that we are all part of a common humanity, all in the same boat.

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Endnotes

- 1 Gitlin, Todd 1995, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, Metropolitan Books, New York, p. 91.
 - 2 Jayasuriya, Laksiri, 'Rethinking Australian multiculturalism: Towards a new paradigm', *The Australian Quarterly*, Autumn, 1990, p. 50.
 - 3 *ibid.*, p. 57.
 - 4 Katwala, Sunder, 'Why I'm proud to be a mongrel Brit', *The Observer*, 11 April 2004.
 - 5 The developments are reported in both popular accounts and in books written by research scientists. In the first group are: Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, Penguin, London, 2002; Matt Ridley, *Nature via Nurture: Genes, Experience and What Makes Us Human*, HarperCollins, New York, 2003; Peter Singer, *A Darwinian Left: Politics Evolution and Co-operation*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1999; Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life*, Abacus, London 1996.
- In the second category are books such as: John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992; Frans De Waal, *The Ape and the Sushi Master: Cultural Reflections of a Primatologist*, Penguin, London, 2002; Christopher Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest: The Evolution of Egalitarian Behaviour*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1999.
- 6 Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, pp. 294, 323.
 - 7 Ang, Ien, 'From anti-racism to interracial trust', speech at the 'Beyond Tolerance: National Conference on Racism', March 2002, in Justin Healey (ed.), *Racism in Australia*, The Spinney Press, Thirroul, NSW, 2003.
 - 8 See Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, chapters 14–16; Wright, *The Moral Animal*, chapters 7, 9, 13; De Waal, *The Ape and the Sushi Master*, chapter 10; Singer, *A Darwinian Left*, chapters 3, 4.
 - 9 Nussbaum, Martha, 'Cosmopolitan Emotions?', *New Humanist*, Winter, 2001.