

Multicultural muddles

Transforming a 'White Australia': Issues of Racism and Immigration by L. Jayasuriya.

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Review by Katharine Betts

Australia is a deeply racist nation, burdened by a blood-stained bigoted past, and now stumbling into a multiracial, Asia-centric future. This is the image of his country Laksiri Jayasuriya holds and his book is a record of his struggle to make sense of it.

It is an image at one end of a continuum marked by two poles. Towards one pole is a vision, long-held by many voters, but not often found in the scholarly literature. It values a cohesive nation of equal citizens, committed to each other's welfare and the stewardship of their shared continent. Those who hold it see a nation where migrants who want to join the national team and share its fate are welcomed and accepted. It is the patriotic vision.

The view towards the other pole sees the former as oppressive. In contrast to the patriots' ideal of identification and belonging, proponents hold that minorities should be helped to maintain their differences. Encouraging them to make common cause with their fellow citizens is assimilationist, racist, and a sign of bullying from the dominant group. (See for example Jayasuriya 2012: 21-2, 32, 39-40, 107.) Now that Australia is ethnically heterogeneous any emphasis on the emotional ties which hold us together is dangerous or just code for a 'shallow Anglo-centric sense of Australian consciousness' (p. 120). The only principles that can govern us are those of commonly accepted laws and procedures. This is the procedural vision, and Jayasuriya takes it as his starting point (pp. 17, 114, 117).

Given his title it is understandable that the book focuses on racism: the old racism of hierarchies based on skin colour, and the so-called new racism of inclusion and exclusion. Both in his view are closely linked to nationalism, especially in Australia (pp. 3, 21-22, 39-40, 49, 52). But he is particularly concerned with their origin in what he terms 'British racism'. This is a unique form, based not on skin colour alone but also on ideas about stock or origin. Nevertheless, it is still exceptionally colour conscious (pp. 25-30, 51). (The British did initiate the abolition of slavery, a point which Jayasuriya mentions, but does not dwell on (p. 30).)



While he claims that the old racism of the white Australia policy still has a deep hold on Australians much of the book is devoted to new racism. This is based on the idea of difference: new racists prefer to be with their own kind and tend to exclude and ignore people who are different. Where old racists worried about hierarchies of worth based on skin colour, and fussed about racial purity, new racists focus on exclusion and 'the denial of "difference"' (p. xiii). They prefer to mingle with people like themselves, perhaps those brought up on Beatrix Potter and Winnie-the-Pooh. They do not despise people who are different; they just ignore them because they feel more comfortable with people like themselves. But this preference is not as harmless as it looks. It leads to the exclusion of outsiders, people construed as the other. Members of the dominant group should suppress their sense of difference and expand their social circles to include people and groups who are different.

But what about differences seen from the point of view of minorities? These differences are different. Rather than being suppressed and ignored they should be recognised, preferably in law. The problem with multiculturalism in Australia so far is that it has concentrated on culture, the culture of individuals. We have had the ethnic-identities model of cultural multiculturalism, focused on the individual. This springs from political liberalism and the idea of the universal equality of individual citizens; an individual's culture should be honoured but, in the final analysis, we are all equals. Such a philosophy turned out not to be the best way of incorporating immigrants because, though it 'proved eminently functional for newcomers', it restricted their striving to the private realm. In this way it regulated and controlled them and it did nothing to prevent the rise of new racism (p. 9).

Instead of cultural multiculturalism we need structural multiculturalism (pp. 5, 7-8) with political recognition of group rights for ethnic minorities. 'Put simply, by reframing citizenship in this manner we acknowledge that when a society is socially differentiated, citizenship must equally be so'. This means differentiated (or multicultural) citizen-

ship (p. 15) and, having gained it, minorities will be able to participate as groups in the public realm (pp. 2, 90-92). But for this outcome to be achieved the new form of citizenship must be incorporated into a Bill of Rights (p. 18).

Such a change would mean a thoroughgoing restructure of the country's political institutions (p. 17). But what is the problem that this upheaval will resolve? Despite two chapters devoted to the history of laws against racial discrimination, Jayasuriya presents little evidence on the current prevalence of racism. Rather he suggests that his new model will help us move towards 'the knowledge based economy of the Asian century' (p. 19) and that it may help migrants. For example, too few of them occupy the 'commanding heights' of Australian society (p. 122). And they are disadvantaged and suffer inequalities (p. 8). (Oddly enough they are also seen as flouting Australian norms by working too hard and trying to get ahead (pp. 10, 49).)

Though the nature of the problem is unclear, we need to move away from the 'narrowly conceived' idea of universal citizenship and embrace citizenship differentiated by ethnic group (pp. 14-15). But this bold plan leads to a dilemma of difference that Jayasuriya does not confront. When practiced by the dominant group, reacting to difference is racist (p. 52). In contrast, insisting that difference be enshrined in law is anti-racist when advocated by a minority group, or by scholars who claim to speak for such groups.

How would the new plan be received by the majority? Jayasuriya does not discuss this directly but he does write that for Australians, as for many Europeans, racism has entered a new phase and takes 'the form of a plea for the identity and respect for the rights of majority' (here he is quoting Parekh) (pp. 10, 47). 'Racist' pleas for respect could escalate if the recognition longed for by the majority is denied to them, but readily conferred on minorities. Indeed, the formal institution of group rights for minorities could result in group-based competition for resources and considerable disharmony.

And then there is the dark side of equality. Cultural multiculturalism, Jayasuriya claims, is based on the individual, not the group. It is based on the principle of equality and this is 'problematic for Australian multiculturalism', because its advocates insist on universalism and treating people in the same way. This leads 'to a denial of difference

and particularisms which are implicit in a multicultural society' (p. 85). Equality oppresses minorities because it is based on individual rather than group rights. It is oppressive partly because a person's culture is not static (if it were that would imply essentialism) but mostly because it does not recognise structurally-based disadvantage. Only differentiated citizenship can remedy the injustice of individual equality.

There are some strange elisions in Jayasuriya's story. How was it, for example, that the deeply racist nation he describes so readily developed a policy of multiculturalism, even if it was of the wrong kind? There is no mystery here; it just happened, because 'it was readily acknowledged that the conventional anglo-assimilationism was in need of some modification' (p. 4). And the history of multiculturalism he presents comes to an abrupt end in 2007. There is nothing about its revival under the Gillard Government, and almost no mention of public concern about Muslim immigrants. In Jayasuriya's eyes it is Asians, marked by their skin colour, who are the victims of exclusion. This is despite his claim that the consciousness of difference fuelling new racism is 'not constructed in racial or biological terms but in terms of group norms and attitudes' (p. 10). He also claims that reservations about immigration are not about the size of the intake but about settlement policy and multiculturalism (p. 115), and that concern about its impact on the economy and environment is 'in reality code for anti-Asian racism' (p. 48). Given this, it is odd that he does not mention the big Australia debate and the 2010 election.

Jayasuriya's book is not only about racism; it is a work of general political theory. He sets his story within a framework bounded by patriotism (conceived as xenophobic nationalism) on the one side and proceduralism on the other. But he moves the story beyond this framework, advocating not a proceduralism based on universal rules, but one based on differences. This is a stimulating approach. If at times it seems a little incoherent this may be because the patriotic view that he contests has not been sufficiently clearly expressed in the circles in which he moves.

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