Australian Multiculturalism: Revisiting Australia's Political Heritage and the Migrant Presence

Australian multiculturalism has become central to the nation's political landscape, yet historians have rarely considered the impact of government policies on migrants' pre-existing political identities. Multiculturalism became government policy in 1973, in recognition of the new complexity of Australian society that followed greatly increased post-war immigration. The new policy sought to facilitate migrants' inclusion in Australian society, without obliging them to surrender their cultural heritage. Similarly to the government's emphasis on ethnic identity, historians have displayed sustained interest in ethnic heritage, rather than on migrants' political belief. New research in transnational histories and social memory studies provide renewed potential to evaluate the processes through which migrants' political and moral ideals have been transferred to Australia. Memories of social norms and cultural landscapes existed in a dialogue with migrants' everyday Australian experiences, helping to frame their engagement with broader society. The closer integration of multicultural studies with transnational research and memory studies offers new perspectives of Australian history, and a deeper understanding of migrants' engagement in multicultural Australia.

Colonial governments in nineteenth century Australia had sought to establish a vibrant British culture in the antipodes, and placed great emphasis on public adherence to British norms of behaviour. The importance placed on British culture was strengthened from 1901, when Australian Federation heralded the creation of the White Australia Policy. Non-white immigrants were henceforth barred from settling in Australia, and many non-white residents were deported. As a result of heightened racial awareness, even southern Europeans found themselves marginalised in Australia's Anglicised public space. Although Australia's population increased rapidly from approximately 3,770,000 in 1901 to 6,929,000 in 1939, only 5.95% of its residents were non-European on the outbreak of the Second World War.[1]

Following the Second World War, government policy shifted markedly in order to increase the rate of immigration and population growth. Initially, the government targeted northern Europe's population of Displaced Persons (DPs), whom it hoped were both ethnically suitable and hostile to communism. Although a preference remained for British settlers, the range of donor countries

steadily widened over time to include immigrants from any European or Latin American background. The scale of immigration placed severe pressure on the country's model of assimilation for migrant settlement, and social inequality had become increasingly pronounced by the early 1970s.

As the failure of assimilation became clear, government policies sought to improve access to welfare services in order to aid migrants' settlement and long-term integration. By 1976, Australia's population had increased to 13,548,000, of which half the over-seas born population now originated outside the United Kingdom and Ireland.[2] In response to the increased diversity of immigrants' origins, the government adopted an official policy of multiculturalism in 1973, aiming to improve social cohesion and migrants' settlement. The policy's meaning was contested from its inception however, and multiculturalism's remit remained fluid as governments responded to Australia's rapidly changing demographic composition.

The impact of these multicultural policies on Australian national identity has remained a point of intense contention. The multicultural framework emphasised ethnicity, and sought to marginalise public fears regarding migrant difference and the potential introduction of political dissention. New academic research in transnational histories and social memory studies provide a renewed potential to evaluate how migrants transferred social and political norms to Australia. A closer integration of multicultural studies with transnational research will enrich awareness of Australian history, and deepen understanding of how migrants engaged in multiculturalism on the basis of their past experiences. This article argues that multicultural policies rarely addressed migrants' prior knowledge and political habits, and that the emphasis on ethnic identities frequently concealed the enactment of wide-ranging political ideals in Australian public space.

Multiculturalism

The tendency to marginalise ethnic histories within the dominant Anglo-Australian narrative is a longstanding tradition, and created pervasive bias in the public discussion of Australia's past. Early Australian historians were concerned to write histories that would create a sense of nation and elevated purpose that was sufficient to galvanise a fragile Australian national identity. Ann Curthoys rightly noted Charles Manning Clark's desire to associate the Australian settler experience with great, and supposedly universal, themes of individual struggle and heroism.[3] Such themes and virtues were white and Western in origin however, and their elevated importance demanded the subordination of lesser narratives.

Migrants' position in Australian histories has undergone radical revision since the acceleration of migration following the Second World War.[4] Charles Price carried out extensive demographic analyses in the post-war era, which sought to raise Anglophone awareness of the migrant experience. His work tended to homogenise ethnic characteristics, suggesting islands of "folk settlements" that were on the periphery of a majority Anglo-Celtic culture.[5] Many post-war historians characterised migrants' presence as proof of Australia's generosity towards DPs, rather than as a reluctant decision to broaden the migrant intake in order to acquire labourers and lessen the perceived threat of Asian invasion.[6] As Marilyn Lake has commented, the new immigrants were assumed to make "contributions" to Australia's national history, rather than exist in an equal and dialogous relationship with it.[7]

The recent interest in transnational histories has situated Australia in the global context, focussing predominantly on the points at which class, gender and whiteness intersect.[8] Australia's position in the British Empire, and in Anglophone settler societies more generally, has been of primary interest to historians eager to capture the public interest. This has resulted in a greatly enriched understanding of the processes that influenced the formation of the nation's civic and cultural landscape. Paradoxically it has also tended to "subsume all history within the boundaries of the imperial relationship".[9] Research has targeted white Australians, whether labour or elite intellectuals, as the most visible points of intersection with wider Anglophone and imperial relations. There has been some attempt to compare Australian ethnic groups with overseas communities, but studies have generally stopped short of more thorough investigation of the historical circuits of ideas in which Australia remained generally peripheral.[10]

Australian history has much to benefit from an improved understanding of the country's position in various transnational cultural communities. New histories are emerging as scholars investigate the routes of oceanic travel and migrants' communication with like-minded individuals outside Australia and their home countries. Migrants constituted their identities through reference to debates that evoked specific locales, constructed through discussions with individuals throughout the world.[11] Migrants' pasts, and their transnational awareness, often included defining cultural moments that were reimagined and projected across the cultural landscapes of their new homes. The editors of *Transnational Ties*, for example, rightly commented that transnational history is not a case of tracing the movement of certain individuals, but of investigating such individuals' "imaginative reach".[12]

For much of the twentieth century, Australians' conception of self was intimately bound with the White Australia policy. Ien Ang commented that migrants had to be rapidly assimilated into a white Anglo-Australian culture in order to maintain what she termed the "racial and spatial symbiosis" that underpinned Australia's social and political consensus.[13] Groups, such as the Good Neighbour Movement, sought to educate white migrants on Anglo-Celtic norms of public behaviour as quickly as possible.[14] The attempt to create this "symbiosis" reinforced an insularity that mitigated any unnecessary engagement with regional neighbours and racial Others. In 1973, the shift in government policies and decision to embed cultural pluralism in public space recognised the limitations of previous models of integration and assimilation.

Australian multiculturalism was subjected to extensive international comparisons, most notably with the emerging recognition of cultural pluralism in Canada and the United States of America. Scholars, such as Mark Lopez, noted that the Australian government's initial plans for multicultural policies derived considerable inspiration from the New Left and Black Power lobby groups.[15] This early impetus towards political pluralism was never institutionalised. Whereas Canadian multiculturalism sought to preserve cultural heritage, and American policies focussed on constitutional guarantees of civil rights, Australian multiculturalism became associated with welfare support on the model advocated by David Cox.[16] Australia's new policy did not seek to enshrine special rights for particular groups,[17] but instead targeted equity of access to social welfare.[18] Nonetheless, Michael Humphrey noted that the new policies "ethnicised" subsequent public debate relating more broadly to migration topics.[19] Ghassan Hage argued that the focus on social welfare and middle class values generated a movement that associated a de-politicised multicultural aesthetic with the wider process of globalisation.[20] Yet, despite this emphasis on social welfare, Australian multiculturalism facilitated migrants' reference to cultural memories that possessed profound political significance.

Jean Martin's *Migrant Presence*, written in 1977, was one of the first serious attempts to theorise a post-war Australian cultural reality that included migrants.[21] There had been recognition from a relatively early stage that "migrants are not innately less political".[22] Yet, a number of scholars and popular commentators remained convinced that migrants' "apathy runs deep" since they had been "failed" by the politics of their home countries.[23] Recognising that migrants in fact faced structural barriers to equality, Martin argued for the formation of ethnic lobby groups in a pluralistic civil society. Her work was not unique in recognising that some form of civic organisation was needed to facilitate migrants' engagement in civil society. Indeed, she worked closely with her colleague at the Australian National University, Jerzy Zubrzycki. Together, they argued for a cultural

pluralism that would be based on voluntary association between disparate groups of people consenting to common political frameworks. Their argument that local civic organisations would lead progressively to a sense of inclusive national identity became a fundamental tenet of Australian multiculturalism.[24]

Jean Martin cited sports clubs as potentially vital tools to embed pluralistic social structures.[25] Historians, such as John Hughson, have since noted that these clubs also provided discursive space for migrants to enact nationalist rivalries in public. In one such example, Melbourne's Latin American soccer teams experienced a series of debilitating political arguments in the 1970s, leading teams to splinter acrimoniously into rival factions.[26] This pattern continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and was repeated when migrants from the former Yugoslavia enacted increasing political tensions on the soccer field.[27] The elevated status of soccer in many migrants' home countries meant that the game became integral to their home societies' gradual transition to democracy. Australia's ethnic teams provided a similar arena in which to dispute claims to historical justice and reconciliation, complicating Martin's vision of social inclusion.[28] Nonetheless, Australian sport has continued to provide a platform that facilitates public disputation of social memories without regularly provoking concern amongst Anglo-Australians.

Martin's work emphasised that the migrant presence was longstanding in Australia, and that cultural pluralism extended beyond governments' specific multicultural policies. This pervasive presence of multiple migrant groups draws attention to questions of trans- and interculturality within migrants' expanding "imaginative reach". As Homi Bhabha stated in the early 1990s, it became clear that "political empowerment, and the enlargement of the multiculturalist cause, comes from posing questions of solidarity and community from the interstitial perspective".[29] His rejection of essentialist notions of identity offers a means to critique the public presentation of Australian cultural pluralism in the 1980s and 1990s, focussing on ethnic and linguistic groups that acted in relative isolation from each other. Bhabha's comments need not trivialise the role that multicultural policies have played in safeguarding migrants' cultural heritage, but do draw attention to the limits of such policies as paradigms that emphasise depoliticised ethnicities at the expense of other facets of migrants' lives.

<u>Multiple Cultures</u>

Migrants' shifting response to cultural pluralism and government policies reveal new aspects of Australia's immigration history. Following the Second World War, the country had encouraged immigration from the DPs of northern Europe, in an attempt to preserve a majority white population.[30] Many DPs had fled before the advancing armies of both the Nazis and Soviets, and sought a new beginning in Australia. DPs' migration did not cause amnesia regarding their traumatic pasts however, nor did it negate deeply held beliefs formed prior to their emigration. Rather, individuals displayed a pronounced desire for continuity and integrity in their life narratives that was reflected by their actions in Australia.

Australia's Cold War culture, revolving around the twin spectres of communism and threat from Asia, evoked powerful memories of turmoil in DPs' former homes. Yet, the migrants' understanding of the Australian rhetoric was conditioned by their powerful sense of detachment from debates (in both Australia and their former homes). Ted Bodwell termed this a form of grieving that involved "re-storying" loss, by writing new futures into life narratives.[31] For Australia's post-war migrants, these narratives bridged the physical distance between the formative traumas they had witnessed in Europe and the cultural landscapes of their new lives in Australia. Discussing their past in public could provide the migrants with an opportunity to safeguard their experiences as collective memories. Yet such opportunity was rare, and migrants' defining moments of personal suffering rarely received social recognition from a wary Australian public.[32] This inability to engage Australian society in the twin discursive processes of settlement and reconciliation reduced migrants' own subjective understanding of their sense of self, further complicating the projection of their pasts in Australia.

The study of social memories offers new understanding regarding post-war migrants' engagement with Australian cultural pluralism. Pierre Nora famously described the process by which communities invest social identities into "polyreferential entities", which were capable of embodying and encapsulating fluid narratives of social memory.[33] His influential texts have informed Australian scholars, such as Maria Tumarkin, who have reassessed how Australians integrate traumatic social memories with social identities and lived environments.[34] Cultural landscapes were central to migrants' ongoing relationship with Australia and their country of origin. Thus the memory of sites, which had been physically destroyed or lost through exile, validated the DPs' deeply held moral and political beliefs. Many migrants sought comparable sites, within Australia, in which to invest similar meanings and identities. Whilst this 'restored' and referenced their narrative in the local context, it simultaneously allowed them to assert common membership of the remembered communities and values of their past.

Australian migrant groups settled increasingly in working class suburbs in the large metropolitan centres during the 1960s, frequently working in poorly paid manufacturing industries.[35] Disorientated and often disheartened at their low status, the migrants' memories of their former homes provided justification for "authenticated practices" that became embedded in their new homes.[36] As Anglo-Australians became aware of increasingly visible migrant groups, such signifiers of ethnic difference publicly asserted the continued saliency of migrants' pasts. Anglo-Australians' increasing awareness of these ethnic enclaves placed renewed pressure on how migrant communities projected their identities. In one example in 1964, Queensland courts became embroiled in a dispute within Brisbane's Serbian community. Different factions contested rights to access Orthodox churches, amid recriminations regarding attitudes to the competing loyalties of Serbian and Australian nationalism. Communities directed considerable effort and resources towards ensuring loyalty and tradition were projected satisfactorily. Migrant rhetoric centred on this use of morality, once remembered cultural landscapes from Europe became increasingly reconstructed as social Utopias. In a process that shares similarities with Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities", migrants used the past to consolidate contemporary identities and norms that offered empowerment in the Australian context.[37]

The reception of migrant identities has been analysed in considerable depth by Charles Taylor.[38] Taylor argued that migrants' careful projection of ethnic identities was informed by a concern to secure local recognition, but also derived from a desire to prevent the misrecognition of their identities by others.[39] This risk of misrecognition was profound, given that migrant identities possessed imagined audiences in both Australia and former homes, such as Serbia and the global Orthodox community of faith. Taylor's work relates closely to Bhabha's, who argued that identities were only actively recognised at points of contested difference.[40] It is not the occasional recognition of "authenticated practices" that gave meaning to migrants' pasts in Australia, but rather how such practices were amplified and influenced migrants' engagement with the local cultural landscape.

By the 1970s, many of Australia's immigrants came from countries in the throes of turbulent democratic transition and uneven economic development. New arrivals from Turkey and Latin America possessed political views predicated on absolute political morality born from significant social disruption. Despite the onset of Australia's multicultural policies in 1973, many such migrants sought to continue struggles associated with their former homes through intercultural cooperation. Australia's many Chilean migrants were deeply divided between economic migrants and those who had purposely fled the Pinochet dictatorship, generating significant community tensions during the 1970s and 1980s. Many of the politicised leftwing migrants engaged closely with radical groups in

Australian universities, perceiving a means of expression and a route to social validation. Others joined Australian trade unions which sent delegations to Chile in 1974, espousing support and demonstrating solidarity with oppressed Chilean trade unionists.[41]

Churches and religious establishments provide a further example of migrants' engagement in civic society in order to secure space through which to pursue political causes. Many migrants had experienced social violence, and bodies such as the Catholic Church provided an ideal public arena in which to deploy the rhetoric of human rights and to support their former communities. Although some migrants associated Christianity with justification for repressive dictatorship, a number of DPs and Latin Americans in particular, had experienced churches that were strongly aligned with opposition to dictatorship. Australian religious bodies acted as a conduit for moral values, invigorating transnational identification and providing access to public space.

Migrants' political views remained isolated from processes of reconciliation, as their former homes developed towards mature democratic states. Worse, many felt Australians' tendency to ethnicise migrant grievances trivialised their pre-migration experiences. Thus, politicised Chilean migrants watched from afar as their country transitioned to democracy, and began a period of articulating social grievances from the military dictatorship. Yet, Australia's migrants were not part of this process of social healing. Nor were Australian multicultural policies designed to facilitate public accusations of culpability. Indeed, as Bhikhu Parekh noted, it was seen as vital that states find ways to avoid "obsessive brooding on past injustices" and instead aimed for "intercommunal reconciliation".[42] Such comments focus on conflicts that had occurred primarily within the state's jurisdiction. This was not the case for migrants, whose memories of conflict remained focused elsewhere. As Daniel Rothbart and Karina Korostelina have noted, without a process of public discussion, group identities frequently become entangled with narratives of threat and fear.[43] In addition to the more immediate demands of adjustment to Australian democracy, therefore, many migrants appeared unwilling to engage in civic society. Indeed, where migrants' sense of loss failed to be recognised, then as Bhabha intimates, the overlapping or hybridized discourses of loss, justice and exile created powerful sites to resist integration with Australian multicultural society and to oppose cultural pluralism.[44]

Migrants' engagement with cultural pluralism was complicated by this sense of loss. Hage used the example of Lebanese migrants to Australia in order to argue convincingly on the persistence of guilt in migrant communities. Lebanese migrants were not wholly isolated from their former war torn homes, and received regular news from groups with whom they continued to

empathise. Hage argued migrants' decision to leave their community to seek security elsewhere led to an internalised sense of betrayal, and intensified the social bonds that bound migrants across space and time with remembered homes and communities in Lebanon.[45] Guilt further increased when violence repeatedly returned to their former homes. Migrants who continued to participate in the politics and society of their former homes risked accusations of betraying their new Australian community, whilst those who engaged wholeheartedly in Australia were viewed suspiciously for subverting Lebanese community norms.

In such instances, when violent conflict in former homes focussed attention on cultural landscapes of the past, migrants' social memories provided a moral compass or "political weapon" to frame the limits of their participation in Australian society.[46] Paul Ricoeur has written extensively on the need to facilitate a constructive public "dissensus" in social memories, in order to create controversy and the recognition of subjectivity from within communities.[47] Without this, migrants, such as the Lebanese, struggled to form coherent personal narratives that integrated Australia and their former homes. This is vital since, as Alvaro Barros-Lémez states, migrants must resolve "the tension between *reconstructing* a violated past as a guiding framework, and *creating* in response to new reality".[48]

Migrants were aware of the limited tolerance of public discussion of their pasts, notwithstanding their attempts to engage official multicultural policies to their advantage. Research has acknowledged that migrants often struggled to learn the "regulated freedoms" that dictated acceptable public behaviour according to differing contexts.[49] Brian Galligan and Winsome Roberts noted the disorientation migrants initially felt regarding multicultural policies. In particular, they pointed to confusion regarding the emphasis on a civic identity that was defined by abstract respect for diversity, with little space for public debates that were predicated on exclusive morality or deeply held political conviction.[50] Scholars, such as Noel McGinn and Erwin Epstein, have suggested civic initiatives that can reinforce the social structures underpinning democratic sentiment.[51] Yet, many migrants were already highly politically aware and sensitive to moral debate.

Government multiculturalism policies avoided addressing migrants' social exclusion in terms of class (focussing on equity of access through language acquisition), but many migrants viewed their most pressing issues through a sophisticated framework of class relations.[52] Given this, trade unions have frequently been cited as potential vehicles to aid democratic transference.[53] Migrants' sensitivity to issues of class and industrial justice created high expectations that trade unions would offer them an alternative to the constraints of the ethnic framework. Yet despite often possessing

considerable expertise in their countries of origin, migrants were excluded from positions of authority and rapidly deserted the trade union movement. Migrants criticised unions' rigid hierarchy, machismo and racism through out the 1970s and 1980s, but the Anglophone presumption that migrants defer immediately to Australian priorities was particularly galling.[54] Many migrants had hoped that unions would provide a vehicle to continue a lifetime dedication to proletarian struggle and resistance. Once unions' disinterest became apparent, many migrants turned to the Communist Party and New Left movements of the 1960s, in order to seek and articulate demands for radical change.[55] Whilst such movements proved more accommodating, they could not offer access to mainstream debate.

Migrants' participation in Australian civic society has been defined increasingly through the prism of intercultural experience. Longstanding habits of intercultural cooperation to maintain political ideals expanded rapidly, as global communication improved greatly during the 1990s. New media and an increasing fluidity in population movement changed the implications of local organisations to civic society. Migrants now retained real time contact with distant social groups, and were embedded in multiple locales across vast distances.[56] The impact of this on political identities has become a matter of pressing significance, as academics begin to probe the nexus between security and immigration more openly, deconstructing the localised and ethnicised image of migrant social groups. There remains a considerable potential to develop this research historically in order to deepen more contemporary analyses. Such research would broaden understanding of Australian cultural pluralism, but would also direct greater attention to migrants' settlement experience as a dialogous process involving both policies and social memories.

Conclusion

Australian multiculturalism has provided migrants with improved equity of access to welfare support, and facilitated pathways for migrants to engage in civic society. The emphasis on government multiculturalism and ethnicity has obscured other aspects of migrant identity however, including political and social memories that referenced formative pre-migration experiences. New research in transnational histories and social memory studies demonstrate that learning how to behave as Australian migrants was tied to continued mnemonic connections with former homes and communities. Remembered social norms and cultural landscapes existed in a dialogue with migrants' everyday experiences in Australia, helping to frame their engagement with pluralistic civic society (notwithstanding the public emphasis on the ethnic nature of their actions). Australians' limited recognition of migrants' past experiences hampered the development of subjectivity in migrants'

social memories. Yet, greater academic recognition of these experiences, situated in transnational frameworks, offers one means to move forward constructively with a greatly enriched understanding of Australian history.

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