Not the m-word again: Rhetoric and silence in recent multiculturalism debates

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THERE IS A SOLUTION TO ALL the problems
that have accumulated around cultural diver-
sity in Australia. It's so simple it's not even
funny and the beauty is that people from across the
political, social and ethnic spectrum for once seem to
agree: get rid of the m-word. Abolish multicultural-
ism, thundered Pauline Hanson in her maiden speech,
and a great many Australians, not only from within
Hanson's own party, have gone on to agree with her.
John Howard for a while achieved what the others
were only talking about. In December 1997, launch-
ing the issues paper 'Multicultural Australia: the way
forward', he managed to speak about cultural diver-
sity for twenty minutes without using the term
'multiculturalism'.[1] Under the Howard government,
departments and government officials have been
encouraged to avoid the term whenever possible.
This distrust of the m-word is not confined to so-
cially conservative politicians. Aboriginal commu-
nities have repeatedly chosen to position themselves,
and their political/cultural agenda, outside the ambit
of multiculturalism, and so, perhaps more surpris-
ingly, have increasing numbers of non-Anglo-Celtic,
non-indigenous Australians, members of those im-
migrant communities which the terminology and
practices of multiculturalism were primarily in-
tended to serve. "The practice of multiculturalism has
gone astray", argues Nancy Viviani.[2] In a recent pa-
per Kateryna Longley proposes the "way forward" as
"a movement into a space beyond multiculturalism".[3]
Jon Stratton and Ghassan Hage put the case against
what Stratton calls "official multiculturalism" and Hage
"white multiculturalism" in their recent books *Race
Daze* and *White Nation*.[4] Multiculturalism, it would
seem, has in a few years moved from being the most
celebrated concept in Australian social discourse, to
one of the most vilified.

The distrust of multiculturalism expressed in the
randomly selected examples above is not motivated
by the same, or even remotely similar, social and po-
litical agendas. Implicit in much of the anti-multi-
culturalism rhetoric, however, is the notion that the
word itself is at fault, and that its demise, or replace-
ment, will somehow lead to a better state of affairs.
The m-word, as it were, has failed to deliver; it has
been caught sleeping on the job and so has to be sent
to the big lexicon in the sky or whatever it is that
happens to bits of supernumerary vocabulary. If only
it were that simple. But if there is one thing that twen-
tieth-century theory has taught us, it is that language
does not function like pieces of machinery: words
cannot be simply discarded when we decide that they
have come to the end of their useful life. Australia
was one of the first countries to make multi-
culturalism part of the rhetoric of national identity,
but many others have followed suit, among them the
United States and the United Kingdom, and the term
has moved into the wider social and linguistic field,
now informing the discourses of tourism, advertis-
ing and public relations as well as the government-
sponsored public domain. Those who have serious
doubts about the rhetoric of multiculturalism will find
that it simply is not, and never was, there for them to
'abolish'. What recent debates demonstrate, however,
is that multiculturalism, and its implications for the
social construction of Australia, are in need of seri-
ous clarification and rethinking.

Multiculturalism's current image problem did not
start with Pauline Hanson. Hanson and her follow-
ers' objections are in this context more usefully re-
garded as one symptom among many of a more
widespread confusion over concepts and terminol-
ogy. As far back as December 1992, in a valedictory
address on the eve of her departure for Canada, the

cultural critic Sneja Gunew voiced her concerns with the way the debate about multiculturalism in Australia seemed to be heading. The "controversy over terminology", she argued, "has long operated as an excuse for refusing to deal with the substantive socio-political issues involved."[5] The "necessary theoretical work" on multiculturalism, she claimed, is thus being neglected in favour of more fashionable areas of theorizing: "Multicultural studies remain the daggy cousins of radical chic postcolonialism."[6] Part of the reason for this may be that for the theoretically inclined academy, multiculturalism was always hopelessly contaminated by policy and practice, whereas for some (though not for all, and certainly not for indigenous Australians) it seemed possible to retain postcolonialism within the rarified domain of theory. The necessary and useful connections between postcolonial and multicultural theory, between postcolonial theory and multicultural practice and between multicultural theory and multicultural practice, were not given the kind of attention they deserved. The risk, according to Gunew, was considerable: "If Australians consign the need for a continued analysis of multiculturalism to the sidelines, they run the risk of losing the momentum that allowed Australia in the Whitlam era to take the lead in acknowledging its hybrid population and all that it entails."[7] From the vantage point of 2000, it is tempting to read her comments as prophetic.

Obviously, it would be preposterous to argue that if a few more of us had been sitting around theorizing multiculturalism we would have been able to predict, or even prevent, the rise of Pauline and the consequent sea changes affecting the rhetoric and policy-making of the major political parties. The main support for One Nation, after all, came from groups who have little or no involvement in the theoretical analysis of social or cultural phenomena. But if I am right in suggesting that One Nation's confusion about multiculturalism is shared by a majority of Australians, it would seem that not only has the conceptual terrain of multiculturalism been insufficiently mapped, but those who had the ability to do so have failed to communicate their wisdom to the wider community. As a result of this absence of well-informed public debate, Hanson and her followers caught not only mainstream politicians, but also intellectuals, off guard, and it proved difficult to mount a robust and coherent defence of multiculturalism against her accusations. Multiculturalism, as some recent publications have demonstrated, had become

increasingly difficult to defend, except in the most general and unreflective manner.[8]

As we wade through the referential baggage which has accumulated around the term, multiculturalism emerges as an increasingly incoherent and nebulous concept. The language of access and equity bleed into the discourse of diversity in cultural representation in ways that are neither politically useful nor theoretically defensible. Moreover, negative connotations have multiplied to the extent that the m-word is at risk of following 'political correctness', a concept with which it has frequently been associated, to a point beyond all rescue. The most notorious example of this can be found in Paul Sheehan's contribution to the 'culture wars', *Among the Barbarians*, in which the m-word, in its adjectival form, seems to function as a natural attribute to the noun 'industry': the "multicultural industry", it appears, is rapidly overtaking any manufacturing or service industry as a provider of cushy jobs and a drain on the public purse. He also writes at great length about the "multicultural myth", "multicultural ideologues", the "multicultural orthodoxy" and "multicultural zealots", and defines multiculturalism by terms such as "racial axe-grinders", "reverse racism", "social engineering", "cultural enclaves", "tribal animosities", "liberal racism", the "grievance industry", the "thought police", "racial ghettos" and "the general assault on individualism and individual responsibility cloaked in the euphemisms of diversity".[9]

The rhetoric of Paul Sheehan, or even Pauline Hanson, would not concern me so much if it wasn't for the fact that the vision of multiculturalism they project seems to be shared by a great many commentators, many of whom would not dream of sharing their politics. Indeed, one might argue that certain populist images of multiculturalism had been well established long before Paul and Pauline came upon the scene, came, as it were, pre-packaged, only waiting to be occupied by the attitudes and opinions we have come to associate with the backlash. My attempt to make sense of such rhetorical or discursive images has yielded a list of categories, or models of multiculturalism, primarily based on media commentary, political rhetoric and advertising. By labelling these models 'populist' I want to imply that they do not include theoretically sophisticated models of multiculturalism elaborated by academics and other serious analysts, though I am frequently disturbed by the extent to which such models have found their way into the academy and distorted debates on the issue. It is

not simply that these images are damaging, though I think many of them are, but that their juxtaposition, conflation even, reveals contradictions, gaps and silences at the heart of the multiculturalism debate which remain unresolved and under-theorized. The fact that many of these models are constructed to present multiculturalism in an attractive light does not make them less problematic; if anything, it has made them even more intractable to critical analysis.

Recent discussions have distinguished between models of multiculturalism on the grounds of national difference: for example, the Australian brand of multiculturalism has been distinguished from its Canadian or American counterparts. The evolution of multiculturalism over time has also attracted attention, in particular the difference between the predominantly 'white' multiculturalism of the 1970s and the more recent reorientation towards Asia and Asian immigration, which presents a challenge to the earlier model.[10] Other distinctions have been made: Jon Stratton, for example, highlights discrepancies between "official multiculturalism", the ideology pursued by government policy-makers, and "everyday multiculturalism" as the lived experience of cultural diversity.[11] The list of models outlined below is not proposed as an alternative to these sets of distinctions, but rather as a complementary 'take' on contemporary perceptions of multiculturalism in the public domain. My main purpose has been to suggest something of the complexity which has developed around the term, along with its ever-increasing potential for paradox and conceptual confusion.

SENTIMENTAL MULTICULTURALISM is a term frequently used by opponents of cultural diversity to designate a kind of feel-good liberalism which basks in the idea of its own generosity and tolerance but has little to offer in the way of solutions to the conflicts of cultural cohabitation. It works particularly well if the object of such welcoming generosity is someone one can feel sorry for, look down upon, or both. It also depends on one's own cultural assumptions remaining largely unchallenged. On the other hand it has difficulty in coming to terms with individuals and cultures that refuse to remain grate-

ful and humble, or accept being relegated to a lower social or cultural order than the majority culture. In the area of the arts and cultural production in general it translates into a vague sense that multiculturalism is good for you, and that the experience of art forms of diverse cultural derivation somehow makes you a better, or at least a more cultured person than one whose cultural repertoire is more limited.

Undoubtedly this notion of multiculturalism played an important role in Australia in the decades following the Second World War, and still informs the attitudes of those who regard multiculturalism as a modern-day variety of charity. Its main asset, it would seem, is its ability to bestow virtue on the host community. The problem is that presenting multiculturalism as a sentimental attachment to wishy-washy do-good liberalism is also an invitation to dismiss it out of hand, either as a luxury the nation can no longer afford, or as a demeaning and outdated social practice. It is not a model that can be sustained in the face of either reactionary or progressive social thinking.

The related image of what one might call *folkloric or touristic multiculturalism* produces a similar effect.[12] Its appeal to minority cultures as exotic turns them into objects of desire, commodities to be consumed, experienced or played with but set aside when the serious business of living in the modern world has to be faced. Folkloric multiculturalism employs the discourse of authenticity to present ethnic minority cultures as an antidote to the alienation of contemporary life. It produces a discourse of nostalgic longing for the past and the primitive, a museum culture fixed at an indefinite moment of time and packaged for easy consumption. Culture as lived experience gives way to culture as fashion accessory and spectacle. Ethnicity is signalled by food and folklore and a great deal of energy is invested in keeping the cultural product pure, uncontaminated by other cultures, or by the modern world. Folkloric multiculturalism is pervasive, so influential, in fact, that its discourse has changed the way we talk about culture. The current practice of using the term 'ethnic' to designate minority ethnicities only, is an example of this. As a consequence of this usage, minority cultures are made to carry a baggage which belongs in

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travel brochures rather than in the social world, and majority cultures are deprived of their ethnicity: mainstream art and culture are presented as ethnically neutral. Folkloric multiculturalism is one that even most opponents of multiculturalism are happy to embrace: who would not rather eat a variety of national cuisines than nothing but fish and chips? As a way of managing cultural diversity, however, it has little to offer, and the image of multiculturalism projected by such a model has proved both trivial, potentially damaging and an easy target for criticism.

An image of multiculturalism frequently trotted out in conjunction with the folkloric version, in spite of their obvious incompatibilities, is that of *sophisticated cosmopolitanism*. This is multiculturalism of the jet-set variety, whereby those fortunate enough to participate can mix, match and combine ethnic influences. The more varied the sampling, the more daring the combination, the more multicultural it is. Thus, the latest culinary chic, and the Australian trend which, we are told, is in the process of conquering the world of international gastronomy, is the combination of Mediterranean and East Asian influences. The model is characterized by cultural hybridity and frequently associated with postmodernism in its disregard for purity and its constant reworking of cultural traditions. This model, while attractive to many, has been presented by others as 'proof' that multiculturalism is out of touch with the realities of cultural cohabitation in Australia. Culture becomes the preserve of social, intellectual and artistic elites with access to a variety of traditions and modes of expression. To Pauline Hanson and her followers, cosmopolitanism constitutes an all-out attack on traditional Australian cultural values. However, it is not only socially conservative Anglo-Celtic Australians with limited access to a wider cultural capital who perceive this model as threatening: their views are shared by many ethnic minority groups wishing to protect their cultural heritage against appropriation and contamination. The model is starkly at odds with the folkloric model, with its emphasis on authenticity, and with the model favoured by most ethnic minority groups: that of cultural preservation. In spite of that, populist condemnations of multiculturalism will, often in the same breath, dismiss efforts to preserve ethnic minority cultures intact and the creolization of cultural practices as if they were the simultaneous effects of a monolithic policy.[13]

Cultural preservation has always been one of the main objectives behind the activities of ethnic minority organizations in Australia. The maintenance of links with their original culture helps migrants come to terms with life in a new country, and as time passes and the community settles, these organizations take on the task of educating younger members, second- or even third-generation migrants, in traditions and practices that might otherwise get lost over time. Since the inception of multiculturalism in Australia, governments have actively promoted the right to cultural preservation, and have supported community organizations in a number of ways, for example by funding instruction in community languages. In the eyes of opponents of multiculturalism, such practices have resulted in what they call *ethnic ghettos*, in which cultural groups isolate themselves from other groups and resist interaction with mainstream Australian institutions and culture. The call for an abolition of cultural ghettos echoes with monotonous regularity in the daily press and on talkback radio. The fear constantly expressed is that members of such cultural groups will continue to favour their home country over Australia, and so will never become integral parts of Australian society. Ethnic ghettos, according to many, represent a threat to national security; they also carry with them a potential for social unrest. The fact that ethnic minority communities in Australia, practically without exception, are happy to regard Australia as their primary allegiance, and that no serious case of ethnic unrest has been recorded in the postwar period, is not enough to lay such fears to rest. The fear of that which is unknown, different, and that resists assimilation, is obviously still a major factor in the opposition to multiculturalism. Policies of cultural preservation have also been criticized from the opposite side of the political spectrum. Jon Stratton, in particular, argues that "official multiculturalism" in Australia, with its emphasis on a plurality of separate cultural identities, ignores the cultural negotiations encountered in everyday life and does not provide the conceptual tools to combat a rising tide of racism.[14]

Cultural assimilation was officially abandoned as a strategy for managing the effects of mass immigration at the inception of multiculturalism in the 1970s. Today, as the call for the abolition of multiculturalism becomes more frequent, assimilation is once again coming into favour as a model for social cohabitation. Recent debates reveal that assimilation has never gone away – in fact many have persisted in regarding multiculturalism as simply a new name for the management of the process of assimilation. The terms

of reference given the National Multicultural Advisory Council in 1997 for their preparation of the issues paper 'Multicultural Australia: the way forward' state that the report should be "aimed at ensuring that cultural diversity is a unifying force for Australia."[15] The rhetoric of 'unity in diversity' is widely supported, more often than not underpinned by the discourse of assimilation. On the day the issues paper was launched, a Melbourne high school principal was asked to comment on how his school coped with a student population from fifty-six different nationalities. "We really go out of our way to celebrate their diversity," he said, but then went on to add: "In these guys here, I see a real eagerness to improve themselves and become Australian."[16] Multiculturalism here functions merely as a facade for a politics of assimilation, and it would seem that little has changed over the last thirty years. The difference, of course, lies in the fact that recent waves of migrants, from places like the Middle East and East Asia, have found it more difficult to assimilate into a largely European culture than did the predominantly European postwar immigrants. The Australian unwillingness to accept these migrant communities as integral parts of the nation clearly indicates that racial discrimination has survived into the multicultural era. Jon Stratton argues that a "new racism", or "culturalism" now dominates the anti-multiculturalism and anti-immigration discourse, according to which non-Europeans are culturally too different to make the required adjustments to the dominant Australian way of life. It is this discourse that allows Pauline Hanson to express anti-Asian and anti-Aboriginal views and at the same time argue that she is "not a racist in any sense of that word".[17]

One of the extreme images of multiculturalism to have found favour with vocal minorities in Australia today is that of *reverse racism*. No doubt such notions are the unfortunate consequence of the importation of the political correctness debate into the Australian context. The perception that ethnic minorities, along with other minority groups, have profited from practices of affirmative action to the extent that the white majority now is the disadvantaged group, is gaining ground in a society where the level of unemployment is high and traditional low-skill

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jobs are disappearing, leaving older and working-class Australians particularly vulnerable. It is this view that underpins the populist argument against multiculturalism, in the case of Paul Sheehan providing the basis for an all-out attack on the Labor Party, which he accuses of social engineering and widespread corruption. Interestingly, this argument has also been taken up by a number of writers and artists, who argue that they are being overlooked by funding bodies in favour of ethnic minority artists. "A lavish public soup kitchen for the Beards, ethnic politicos who couldn't make it in their home countries" is how the poet Les Murray refers to government sponsorship of ethnic minority art.[18]

The main (some would say only) reason for the retention of multiculturalism recognized by the current government is the risk to foreign trade occasioned by the backlash. The government's belated denunciation of Pauline Hanson, and half-hearted endorsement of the principle of multiculturalism have been offered in the mode of damage control. What I call *politically* or *economically expedient multiculturalism* is clearly in evidence in the 1997 issues paper, where the section 'Why accept these principles?' lists the following reasons prominently: "diversity can enhance Australia's ability to compete and market ourselves globally and therefore add to economic growth", migrants "link Australia into a wealth of business and personal contacts in countries where we want to do business", "Australia has significant advantages in terms of economic opportunities in Asia which would not have been readily available if Australia had remained a closed society", and "a harmonious and cohesive society together with cultural and linguistic skills facilitates Australia's attraction as a tourist destination and as an education export country".[19] Ghassan Hage discusses Paul Keating's notion of "productive diversity" as a shift in government rhetoric from a discourse of consumption to a discourse of exploitation, arguing that it was the Labor government that initiated the view of multiculturalism as an economically exploitable resource.[20] Under the Howard government, the discrepancy between the openness towards Asia expressed in the field of economics and the protectionism favoured in areas of

social and cultural practices has become glaringly obvious and, not surprisingly, has returned to haunt Australians in their dealings with their Asian neighbours.

My final model, or image, is that of the *empty signifier*. Multiculturalism, according to such a construction, has become nothing but a rhetorical gesture; like Baudrillard's simulacrum it masks the absence of an underlying reality. It is a void, a silence, which reverses the silences in the Howard government's issues paper: not a lengthy discussion of a concept that has no name, but a name to which no meaning can be attached. The multicultural rhetoric of difference, it has been argued, functions to cover up both indifference and lack of differentiation. The Chinese-Australian poet Ouyang Yu, in his poem 'Moon Over Melbourne' uses the image of "multicultural sleep" in his description of Australia's attitude to the lonely migrant: a 'sleep' that can be read as benign acceptance, but also as indifference, or even hidden hostility.[21] After almost three decades of multiculturalism, the term, for many, has become a convenient pretext for not dealing with the issues arising from cultural difference. For governments and individuals alike, it offers opportunities for self-congratulation but not for self-scrutiny. To me, Ouyang's image suggests that a certain tiredness has become attached to the notion of multiculturalism. Perhaps its referential baggage has become too heavy a load for one word to bear, perhaps it is cracking under the strain. Multiculturalism, in its populist versions, has become suggestive of numerous competing discourses, but does not make fine distinctions. In its effort to be all-inclusive, it might erase difference, in its efforts to present cultural cohabitation in an attractive light, it might sweep under the carpet, and so in effect silence some of the issues it most urgently needs to address. Foremost among such silences, as a number of commentators have pointed out, is the question of race, and this is where the multiculturalism debate in Australia has the most to learn from similar debates in other countries, and from the theory and practices of postcolonialism.

GETTING RID of multiculturalism has repeatedly been advocated as the quick way to resolve cultural tensions and settle social unrest in contemporary Australia, but like all easy solutions to complex problems, it simply won't work. The image problem is real enough, so serious, in fact, that a monumental rescue operation is called for. The long overdue debate is currently gaining momentum, as evidenced by a spate of recent publications as well as conferences and other events.[22] I share the concerns about current practices and policies of multiculturalism expressed by authors such as Hage and Stratton; I also worry that if the attack from the left becomes as vehement as the attack from the right, the socially enlightened ideas that inspired the inception and implementation of Australian multiculturalism might be dismissed together with its less desirable baggage. The void in the middle would be another kind of silence, a silence dangerously close to John Howard's solution. I remember a rare moment of idealism creeping into the multiculturalism debate when Jason Li told a recent conference of a dream in which the prime minister visits a high school in order to persuade the coming generation of voters to support him. Despite his efforts, the students remain unimpressed, and John Howard eventually challenges them directly to say why they won't vote for him. Their answer is unanimous: "because you've forgotten the magic word".[23]

The m-word requires a great deal of work, theoretical as well as political, if it is to survive the conceptual confusion and persistent vilification of the backlash era. It could also do with a bit of magic.

ENDNOTES

1. 'Let's keep the m-word', editorial, *The Age*, 16 December 1997, p. 14. The paper 'Multicultural Australia: the way forward', presented by the National Multicultural Advisory Council in December 1997 can be found on <http://www.immi.gov.au/general/notices/macpaper.htm>. For further comments on the paper see Greg Sheridan, 'Just don't mention the "m" word', *The Australian*, 12 December 1997, p.13 and Brian Woodley, 'Words with a world of meaning', *The Australian*, 12 December 1997, p. 4.
2. Nancy Viviani, 'Multiculturalism: why it's gone astray', *The Age*, 6 August 1998, p. 13.
3. Kateryna Longley, 'Beyond multiculturalism: Australia and Canada', paper presented to the ACSANZ conference at Macquarie University in July 1998.
4. Jon Stratton, *Race Daze: Australia in Identity Crisis*, Sydney, Pluto Press, 1998. Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Sydney, Pluto Press, 1998.
5. Sneja Gunew, 'Multicultural Multiplicities: US, Canada, Australia', in David Bennett, ed., *Cultural Studies: Pluralism and Theory*, Melbourne, Department of English, University of Melbourne, 1993, p. 54.
6. Gunew.

7. Gunew.
8. See Stratton and Hage. See also David Bennett, ed., *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998. This paper refers to these and other academic analyses of multiculturalism, but concerns itself primarily with populist models of multiculturalism constructed in the media and mainstream politics.
9. Paul Sheehan, *Among the Barbarians*, Sydney, Random House, 1998.
10. Ghassan Hage, among others, argues that the Australian policy of multiculturalism is based on a model of white dominance, a model that has come under increasing pressure due to the changing patterns of immigrant intake.
11. According to Stratton, p. 154, official multiculturalism is based on notions of group difference, whereas everyday multiculturalism emphasizes individual difference within a general human similarity.
12. Ghassan Hage, ch. 5, uses the expression "white national zoology" to designate a multiculturalism informed by the discourse of tourism.
13. For a further discussion of the role of 'cosmopolitan multiculturalism' within Anglo-Celtic culture, see Ghassan Hage, 'Anglo-Celts today: cosmo-multiculturalism and the phase of the fading phallus', *Communal/Plural* 4, 1994.
14. Stratton.
15. 'Multicultural Australia: the way forward', p. 14.
16. Meaghan Shaw, 'Students enjoy their multicultural melting pot', *The Age*, 12 December 1997. p. A4.
17. Stratton, ch. 2.
18. Les Murray, 'An Unruly Voice Smeared', *The Australian's Review of Books*, February 1997, p. 32.
19. 'Multicultural Australia: the way forward', p. 12.
20. Hage, p. 128.
21. Ouyang Yu, 'Moon Over Melbourne', in *Moon Over Melbourne and Other Poems*, Melbourne, Papyrus Publishing, 1995, p. 9.
22. Examples of the latter include, 'The future of Australian multiculturalism', University of Sydney, December 1998, and 'Re-imagining multiculturalism', Monash University, October 1999.
23. Address to the conference, 'The future of Australian multiculturalism', University of Sydney, December 1998.

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