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CAUCASIAN MYTHS - ANCIENT AND MODERN

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All of us concerned with the education of Aboriginal children must be concerned also with the attitudes held by non-Aboriginal Australians towards Aboriginals. All of us who teach in schools teach about Aboriginals. Our own attitudes will be revealed in what we teach and how we teach. Do we in the schools help to perpetuate the ancient and modern myths discussed below by Mr. Spalding?

"That was the way it was when I was a boy.
The brown man was always spoken of as being
a native, in a tone of voice that meant that
'native' was something other than a proper
human being."*

Perception necessarily begins and ends with oneself. We all look *outward* on to the world. Similarly, when it comes to groups, perception begins with the identifying concept "we"; out beyond the frontiers of the group, and not so well known, are the "theys". It seems that the step from group identification to attitudes of superiority is a small one. Group prejudice and feelings of group superiority may be as old as society itself for family and kin readily serve as a basis for identification. Then, of course, there are numerous other focal points for affiliation and self-identification including language, religion, class and nation.

The Bible is a prominent record of group difference and self-regard. There are some other early commentaries on group consciousness. For instance, the following remark was made by a Chinese historian over 2,000 years ago:

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**Indonesian Journey*. I Southall, Lansdowne, 1965. p.2.

"The barbarians in the north have yellow hair, green eyes, and prominent noses, and are just like the monkeys from which they descended." (1)

Illustrations on ancient Egyptian murals clearly distinguish the red-faced locals from several other peoples of different hue. (2) There have been many "chosen" peoples over the ages. Pagan, Samaritan, gentile, infidel are but some of the terms by which out-groups have been marked for disdain at various times.

But if the self-chosen superiority of groups is an ancient manifestation, theorising about innate superiority is a relatively modern development.

Study of the variations occurring in the human species developed slowly amongst Europeans as their knowledge of other people and other places increased. This knowledge was gained as travellers and soldiers returned home from their expeditions. The indications are that the first attempts to classify human populations according to their inherited characteristics were made towards the end of the eighteenth century. "*Scientific racism*", to use Rose's term for theorizing about the supposed superiority of particular human types, is still more recent.

It might be said that formulation of doctrines ascribing the favoured position of particular groups to their biological inheritance began in Europe in the 1850's. At this time racial discrimination, that is to say prejudice in practice, was well-established in America. European colonialism had, of course, been deeply written into world history well before this. Two essays of quite dissimilar character, which appeared at a time when scientific thought was burgeoning in influence, provided convenient structures around which racist notions could crystallize. The first was a paper by De Gobineau, published in 1853, which set out to explain the evident power and privilege of the so-called "Aryan" families, his own included, as having derived from a "racial" purity not possessed by others. (3) It was an attractive theme which the Nazis took up in Germany many years later. The second influence was Darwin's theory of evolution, *Origin of the Species*. Published in 1858, this paper opened the way for incipient racialists to justify many aspects of colonialism in "survival of the fittest" terms. Even genocide could be rationalized in this way. The application to *cultural development* of Darwinist concepts concerned with biological evolution greatly facilitated racist

modes of thought.

It was common a hundred years ago to rank peoples on a scale extending downwards from the Europeans. This "I'm the king of the castle" disposition, dressed up as science, represented a stance that could be expressed in a multitude of ways. Examples can be readily found, for instance, in the primitive anthropology of Robert Brown's *The Races of Mankind*. The following quotation, which includes a reference to Aboriginal people, might be seen as almost classic in form:

"In many respects the Australian races are about the lowest of the Papuans, but there is a lower depth still to which the Oceanic Negro can attain, as we shall find when we read of the Adaman and Nicobar Islanders and the Nigrittos of the Philippines, ..." (4)

Genuine confusion is caused by a failure to see the distinction between biological endowment generically transmitted, on the one hand, and cultural development on the other. Many examples of this ranking attitude as it affects Aborigines can be found in publications of rather more recent origin.

This statement comes from what can be regarded as a book for schools published about fifty years ago:

"Mentally they (the Aborigines) stand very low on the scale of humanity." (5)

The term "savage" often appeared as a vehicle for carrying this hierarchical mode of thought in earlier writings. Its use still survives as shown by an example from a widely used Australian text book:

"Many were the difficulties which beset them (the pioneering European settlers) - fire, flood, drought, distance and the blind anger of the savages bewildered by the loss of their hunting grounds. ..." (6)

The notion of people on a lower scale of humanity is more often embodied in the terms "primitive" and "native" these days. Unfortunately, it is not difficult to find examples from school books of various kinds. For instance this statement comes from a publication used as a junior general reference:

"The 'Abos' as they are often called, were, and in some areas still are, amongst the most primitive people on earth." (7)

Another common practice is to describe any traditional hunters and gatherers in a negative comparison with industrial technologies.

"... Moreover, there were no animals to provide meat or milk, while the primitive Aborigines neither grew crops nor reared herds." (6)

And from a recent journal:

"The origins of Australia's indigenous population are vague and disputed among the anthropologists. An essentially nomadic people, they had no knowledge of working the land or of raising livestock and lived from day to day on what nature produced and on what they could obtain by hunting and fishing. Today a few remote tribes live in much the same way, while even the 'civilized' Aborigine is still a nomad at heart." (8)

The racial prejudice of white Australia is derived from a European heritage. Our pioneering grandparents and great-grandparents were the inheritors of attitudes running back a further three hundred years to the days when the ships of maritime nations in Europe embarked on daring pioneering adventures. Equipped with new navigational aids and armed with some useful weapons and a rare brand of confidence and aggression, they headed out to discover, to trade, and to colonize for the sake of national honour, gold, and the souls of the unsaved. Thus it was that kings, popes, and traveller's tales helped to shape the attitudes of European communities towards other human groups. The British landed in Australia with few doubts. Were not the fittest rather than the meek to inherit the earth?

It was inevitable that the indigenes would pay a heavy cost when foreigners came to settle this country. Many of the chapters written into the history of modern Australia were drenched with immense suffering as selfishness and ignorance

compounded actions which were directed towards dispossession, harnessing the resources of an unfamiliar environment and establishing familiar patterns of order and government.

There is not much to be salvaged from this general assessment. How can it be otherwise? For two centuries we have been busily engaged in the business of putting to 'good use' the resources of this country which had been hidden from Europe for so long. To trace this preoccupation is to write the history of Australia as colony and as nation. An unbroken line runs through from Governor Phillip to the present day. Land was required to establish a small convict settlement. Phillip took it. Later the free settlers, some respectable and others less so, pushed out from a few beachheads in the early 19th century to take the grass, the timber, and the waterholes in what had come to be known as New South Wales.

The theme of dispossession is carried on into the 20th century by ten thousand expropriations across the continent - by the farmers in three states who employed the original owners to burn heaps of mallee roots on new wheatlands, by the pastoralists in the far north whose shady verandahs stood a few hundred yards from the semi-permanent camps of the very Aboriginal families over whose lands the foreign leases ran.

The attitudes of the newcomers gave rise to unnecessary distress. Sensitivity was lacking in circumstances which demanded it. Aboriginal law and regulation have often been ignored when they should have been taken into account. Our law has been imposed upon people who have signalled no allegiance, people who have been uncomprehending and lacking the resources needed to activate this exotic legal system of ours in their own defence. Not infrequently individual police officers in situations free of the essential restraints of community scrutiny, have turned the law into an instrument of tyranny as far as Aboriginal people are concerned. Men have seen their religious and lodge centres desecrated and the land upon which they all depended usurped. For two centuries, Aboriginal mothers watched their children die, not just from illness, but for want of food. Children have seen their kinsmen die violently; many have been dragged screaming from their families. Adults have gazed despairingly into fires while they contemplated the extinction of their clans. Mature and wise men have wept as they resolved not to hand on to their sons the secrets of life and manhood which had passed previously in a

tradition which may have stretched unbroken over 20,000 years. And, inescapably, there has been the need at every turn to take the white man into account.

In the early days of foreign intrusion death came swiftly for many. Today, the circumstances are not so traumatic. However, the same deep suffering remains for people who do not substantially control their own destinies. Aboriginal children are still being alienated from their parents by imposed social changes. Mothers and grandmothers too often look after sick and dying children. Men sit resigned in many towns, camps and settlements, dominated by their circumstances and, to add insult to injury, by their battling womenfolk.

Some insight into the terrible intensity of Aboriginal suffering is gained by noting the plea voiced by a small all-Aboriginal association which published a pamphlet on January 26th, 1938, the occasion on which the majority group of some ten millions set out to celebrate the 150th anniversary of what they had come to call the 'founding'. Part of the document reads:

"We ask you to be proud of the Australian Aborigines, and not to be led any longer by the superstition that we are a naturally backward and low race. This is a scientific lie, which has helped push our people down and down into the mire." (9)

Naturally enough members of the majority community like to feel that expropriation ended at some point comfortably distant in time and place. However, the line of dispossession runs unbroken through the acquisition of the Woomera Rocket Range, in the early post-war years, through Weipa of the 1950's with all the accompanying rationalizations by government about development, and on to Gove and other situations today. The same line runs indelibly down Main Street of any Australian town and through my backyard and yours. Much of our progress and comfort has been gained at the price of Aboriginal distress and in the absence to date of negotiation and agreed payment.

There has been some warmth and humanity along the way. On occasion pleas for dignity and fair dealing came by slow boat from the Imperial consciences in London. However, these expressions of principle did little to change the overall

character of unfolding events. Certainly, there were times and places where the efforts of concerned people gave promise of better things. Yet even humane settlers had to take a living from the land. Finally their presence, without consent, gave a lie to any espoused principles of just dealing. Often their resolve would be rationalized further for, in those times, even gentler souls who may have been mindful of questions about rights in land would rarely harbour questions about the absolute virtues of Christianity, British rule and western culture. It has to be remembered too that superiority can manifest itself subtly in altruism which is misplaced; where fundamental attitudes and relationships are unhealthy, selfishness and condescension may spring even from good intentions.

Undoubtedly, the centre-piece in a whole edifice of rationalization, disregard and apathy is the expropriation mentality - the earnest desire to see valuable natural resources exploited. Other forms of exploitation have found sanction in settler prejudices also. These include the exploitation of cheap labour and female sexual services.

European technology, activism and self-confidence, imported by the early settlers, have largely shaped the history of this country over the last two hundred years. To what extent has history since re-shaped the attitudes of white Australians towards people of Aboriginal inheritance?

It would be naive to expect that a critical examination of our attitudinal tradition will be achieved readily. However, it is evident that new insights are being gained. There is no escaping the fact that a good deal has happened since World War II to erode somewhat the European's time-honoured view of his right to occupy and use the lands of non-industrialized peoples. Most of the colonial administrators have packed up and gone home. The United Nations has been established around humane and internationally supported principles. Independent non-European nations have come into being. Change of this order could hardly fail to give rise to some soul-searching in former colonies such as Canada, New Zealand, the United States and Australia where there are indigenous minorities. But if one is correct in suggesting that a particular disdain has characterized much of the settlers' dealings with the Aboriginal communities then the process will be especially painful here.

It is all too apparent that at this point of time the old attitudes, attitudes which sway judgement, live on. No one would be too surprized at a bar-room conversation in which a sporting topic turned to the grand Evonne Goolagong's failure to crack a second Wimbledon tennis title and the outstanding Lionel Rose's failure to put together a 'satisfactory' string of world title defences. In other words unconscious bias causes even remarkable performance by individuals who can be identified in any way as Aboriginal to be characterized as failure, the implication being that the inadequacy, however defined, can be traced to an exclusive racial factor. That such a line of reasoning could be presented in all seriousness is a measure of attitudes - and an indication how much we need the disciplines of psychology, sociology and anthropology in our schools and colleges.

The same aberration by which particular characteristics - in this case lack of ambition, loss of concentration, or some such - are unfavourably ascribed to a racial inheritance is revealed in a further quotation from the journal referred to earlier:

"Although the largest concentration, especially of full-blood Aborigines, is to be found in the north, there are considerable numbers scattered throughout the country towns and metropolitan areas of all States. Here their hereditary restlessness, indolence, and ignorance add to the problem of their assimilation into the western society. ..." (8)

Perhaps any majority group Australian might use words like these. Perhaps not. But is the overall attitude towards Aborigines different from what it was a hundred years ago? Is the plea *and not be led any longer by the superstition that we are a naturally backward and low race* still apposite? In facing these questions very little comfort is to be taken from the manner in which a whole gaggle of newspapermen responded to the painful removal of a seven year old Aboriginal girl from an established foster home recently. Derogatory views about the 'primitive' Aboriginal seem to be so close to the surface that one newspaper after another rushed in uncritically with reports and emotive commentaries concerning child marriage, judicial spearing and other aspects of life with the "tribe". Unless, of course, the

newspapers could be credited with making an accurate but cynical assessment of what the general public would feel and believe, in the circumstances.

Much other evidence exists to indicate that the old settler biases are still extant. It is intended that some of this evidence to be found in educational material will be considered in a subsequent article.

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Further Reading

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