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FEELING SUPERIOR WITHOUT REALLY TRYING

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In the first article in this series on learning about Aborigines, Mr. Spalding suggested that racist modes of thought were embedded deeply in Australia's settler community - "much of our progress and comfort has been gained at the price of Aboriginal distress ..." A second article pointed to inadequacies in references to Aboriginal people in various Social Studies books dating from the beginning of the century to recent times.

In this third article attention is focussed upon the processes of indoctrination.

There are many influences operating in the community to shape our biases. The supposed superiority of our own group and the inferiority of another can be readily learned, particularly in childhood. Marie Jahoda puts it this way;

"A child will believe that coloured persons are lazy without ever having seen one just as readily as he will believe that the earth rotates round the sun without asking for evidence, or understanding it when given." (1)

First among formative influences are the attitudes and actions of family and peers. Added to these are the influences of authority figures, teachers included, and the learning materials to be found in schools. A steady diet of traditional bias is provided by the colloquial usages communicated daily by television, radio and newspaper. A thousand other ways of expressing common facts, opinions and stereotypes exist; for example, the pronouncements of community leaders, the texts of government and company reports, official year book summaries, comic stories, the spoken commentaries of outback tourist guides, the promises of tourist brochures, and so on. Children's sessions, breakfast food advertisements, educational and advertising films, desk diaries and souvenirs are other sources referring to Aborigines.

The vast quantities of educational, comic and film material about other peoples - the 'Arabs', 'Orientals', and non-literate societies such as the 'Red Indians' and the 'Pygmies' - which emanates from European sources is relevant to attitudes affecting Aborigines. Once acquired, the habit of making simplistic or derogatory generalizations about any group of people and their differences from one's own community can readily flow across to any other such group. In Australia it can be anticipated that Aboriginal people will feel the consequences of this tendency. Our past history, cultural difference, social separation and physical visibility ensure this. Would a thoughtful Aboriginal person need to doubt that in the minds of many majority group children there exist parallels between non-literate, melanin rich Aboriginal occupants of this country and their descendants, and the attitudes displayed by the many Caucasian Tarzans, Davy Crockets, Phantoms and United States Cavalry commanders towards a host of sable chiefs, braves, witch-doctors, cannibals and scouts which those white Australian children encounter as they face the television barrage or make their own excursions into comics and literature?

PERSONALITY AND RACE BIAS

Some people, probably a small minority, seem prone to develop very strong antagonisms towards the members of other identifiable groups. Deep feelings of this kind constitute part of the defence mechanism established by individuals against difficult psychological conflicts. Readily conforming to social pressure and respectable leadership, people in this category project their personal doubts onto acceptable scapegoats. In such fertile soil the seeds of racism flourish. Brands such as lazy, dirty, emotionally uninhibited and promiscuous are commonly applied to various 'whipping boys' made acceptable by the self-indoctrinating community.

Outside of the highly prejudiced minority is a second and larger category of those individuals who accept or condone the familiar attitudes and practices of their society. Bias here may be derived more from apathy or naivete than from a need to have a group of people who can be regarded as inferior. However, even these more superficial biases will put down roots in circumstances where the dividing line between superiority and inferiority is also the frontier between advantage and disadvantage.

Clear social and economic benefits have remained with the settlers since the passing of the immediate invasion period. Even humane persons of high self-esteem cannot easily resolve conflicts arising from entrenched vested interests and the patent, though commonly sublimated, gap between human rights precepts and actual practice over the years. These uncertainties threaten to surface in the face of realities such as the existing communities of displaced Aboriginal people, Aboriginal ill-health and infant mortality rates, Aboriginal passivity and aggression, as well as a knowledge of negotiations never entered into and historic wrongs waiting to be righted. And because of these factors which go to make up our particular situation, it is doubtful whether there are any Australians remaining to fall into what would be the third and final category of persons in a population - those who have never acquired or who have managed to discard attitudes which savour of superiority towards Aboriginals.

WRESTLING WITH RACE BIAS

If individual psychology and colonial history underlie the attitudes towards Aboriginal people that have been cultivated over the years, then it follows that these attitudes cannot be changed easily. Nor can the outlawing of an offensive word be equated with a change of attitude, except perhaps in the case of persons already ripe and ready for change. And, necessarily, we must face the fact that extreme racial prejudice may be quite beyond amendment.

However, actions are much more important than attitudes. Historian and broadcaster Humphrey McQueen urgently puts the matter into perspective in this way:

"The dangerous and murderous aspect of prejudice is not what whites feel about blacks. The real source of pain is what white society does to blacks through institutions like schools, gaols, reserves, churches ... It is when prejudiced attitudes reinforce and defend institutions, laws and practices which discriminate against Aborigines that they become fatally important. Laws and institutions have to be changed." (2)

None of this means that efforts to face up to in-group bias should be abandoned. There are cogent reasons why determined efforts should be made to objectively examine our language, literature and courses which refer obliquely or directly to

Aboriginal people. There is a prime obligation not to give offence to people who identify as Aboriginals through inaccurate, derogatory or condescending statements. In the second place, any erosion of the machinery through which prejudice is transmitted will, in turn, reduce the influences which work unnoticed to shape the attitudes of new generations of Australians. At the same time the development of new sensitivities throughout the community will have a chastening effect upon those whose racial prejudices and discriminatory practices had been condoned previously.

Examination of the processes of indoctrination may have other practical consequences. The exercise, if carried far enough, may influence the national government and the majority community towards establishing a more just basis for dealings with the Aboriginal minority. Racial discrimination certainly needs to be deprived of official sanction. Community reassessment of traditional usages may lead writers, publishers and film-makers to look at their products. As well as that, the larger question of the process of racist indoctrination deserves the attention of academics. The deeper recesses of this process are not likely to be revealed without careful study. In any case, the study of anti-Aboriginal antagonism is part of the wider field of group prejudice, race relations, and of educational practice designed to reduce intolerance.

Greater attention is now being given to the transmission of racial myths, stereotypes and inaccuracies in school material on Aboriginal topics. Several Aboriginal leaders have volubly criticised particular defamatory books used in schools. Presumably others will do so. There are a few signs suggesting that increasing regard is being paid to the Aboriginal side of the Australian story. Librarians are beginning to analyse the racist influences at work in both fiction and reference material. The first undergraduate courses in Australian race relations have been established. Race bias has been a central theme at recent conferences. Several writers and broadcasters have drawn popular attention to racist usages over the last two or three years. All these are hopeful signs. However, widespread recognition of the factors which transmit and reinforce derogatory views about Aboriginal people will certainly not be achieved overnight.

ETHNOCENTRISM

Ethnocentrism or group centredness is the base upon which the edifice of group superiority is built. We are all substantially

the products of the group from which we have sprung. When we think communally it tends to be in terms of the particular group which is the extension of ourselves.

A tradition of group prejudice, once it is established, has a continuing momentum of its own extending far beyond the simple repetition of racist notions. In fact, notions of racial superiority may never be mentioned. A whole framework of superiority and misconception can be passed from one generation to another by the transmission of various fragments of information, upon which nuclei racist attitudes may cling unseen. Perhaps this is an especially important condition in Australia, growing up as we do with a grossly inadequate knowledge of Aboriginal life. Lacking insight and understanding, we may be more prone to accept simple conclusions than some other peoples. The stereotype is allowed to serve where balanced knowledge or critical questioning is really required or, as suggested above, an ordinary well-used word or phrase is allowed to represent the stereotype. If one's views about Aborigines can be attached to a few well-accepted cues - perhaps 'primitive', 'boomerang', 'witchetty grub' or 'walkabout' - then almost any report or observation about Aboriginal people directed through these colloquial channels will serve to consolidate an existing *feeling* that Aborigines are inferior.

THE ASSESSMENT OF MATERIAL ABOUT ABORIGINES

There is no simple and straightforward way of isolating bias in material about Aborigines. Factual inaccuracy can be uncovered if adequate factual knowledge is at hand, particularly when the inaccuracies are extreme and therefore obvious to most people. However, the areas of comfortable certainty soon give way to wide expanses of opinion and uncertainty.

Criticism also has to look beyond the material itself towards the audience. When the issue is bias, racism and self-delusion the final concern is not what is said, but how this is likely to be interpreted by others.

Another difficulty is that measurement of what has been presented may require comparison with what *might* have been provided. An interesting exercise by McDiarmid and Pratt (3) comparing the treatment of minorities in different social studies text books used in the Canadian province of Ontario shows how difficult it is to apply quantitative assessments of prejudice.

At a meeting of experts on educational methods designed to combat racial prejudice convened by UNESCO in 1968, attention was drawn to particular words which were so charged emotionally as to generally provoke the adverse reaction of the groups described, particularly formerly colonized peoples. (4) The following terms were listed:

<i>tribe</i>	<i>native</i>	<i>savage</i>
<i>primitive</i>	<i>jungle</i>	<i>pagan</i>
<i>kaffir</i>	<i>bushmen</i>	<i>backward</i>
<i>underdeveloped</i>	<i>uncivilized</i>	<i>vernacular</i>
<i>Negro</i>	<i>coloured</i>	<i>race</i>

When a comparison is made between the approaches adopted by authors of Australian materials which on the one hand could be regarded as offensive to people of Aboriginal inheritance, and non-defamatory references on the other, certain differences begin to emerge. Items which seem to be more objective, sensitive, accurate and sophisticated in their reference to Aboriginals also seem to avoid terms and usages which appear, often monotonously in the 'unsatisfactory' group. The following list of devices has been drawn up on this basis. These devices are believed to be part of the process of social conditioning through which ethnocentricity and group superiority are maintained in Australia. Obviously, some categories are more significant than others. There is, inevitably, much overlapping.

SOME SUSPECTED AVENUES OF RACE BIAS

CATEGORY 1 : *Inadequate Treatment*

That is, the failure to take serious account of any Aboriginal dimension inherent in questions under consideration, particularly in history.

CATEGORY 2 : *Social Darwinism*

Failure to make distinction between the ancient process of *biological evolution*, and *cultural development* which has, for the most part, occurred very recently;

Failure to maintain a clear distinction between modern man (*Homo Sapiens*) on the one hand, and earlier men and pre-men

through the use, commonly, of imprecise terms, particularly *cave man* and *Stone Age man*;

Representing human cultural development as a straight upward climb from backwardness to western materialism and industrialisation; an approach often represented by the terms:

<i>progress</i>	<i>civilisation</i>	<i>hunters</i>
<i>naked</i>	<i>primitive people</i>	<i>Stone Age people</i> ;

Employing negative stresses in describing other cultures:

<i>no houses</i>	<i>no agriculture</i>	<i>drank only water</i>
<i>never previously seen a white man</i> ;		
<i>never seen the sea</i> ;		

The concept that the unfittest fail to survive signified by the use of terms such as *dying out*.

CATEGORY 3 : *Colonial Presumption*

The *natives* (meaning people who quite 'appropriately' are subjects for colonisation and 'civilising');

our aborigines and *the Australian aborigines* (the local variety of the white man's burden);

cannibalism (time honoured equivalent to *savage*);

tribal fighting (proneness to fighting - amongst *warriors* and *braves* as opposed to civilised fighting between armies - again equivalent to *savage* or *uncivilised*);

jungle (the place inhabited by natives. *Palm trees* possibly equivalent symbols in Pacific Island contexts);

nomads, *hunters*, *naked* (the identification of supposedly earlier therefore *lower* forms of cultural development). Similarly *tribe* and *tribal*.

CATEGORY 4 : *Stereotypes and Derogatory Concepts*

These are expressions, widely used, bearing notions of superiority. Some may have a factual basis and will be frequently employed in the absence of adequate detailed

information. Others are sentimental or defamatory.

Walkabout, forever on the move, moving from place to place; savage, primitive, the blacks nineteenth century usage). Twentieth century equivalents to be found in *aborigines and natives;*

smiling, childlike, flashing white teeth;

simple, less intelligent, excitable;

witchetty grubs, lizards and snakes;

dirty (also black and dark);

ugly;

good horsemen, tracking ability;

boomerangs, bone-pointing, fire-making;

gin, lubra, and the import from U.S.A., picaninny.

CATEGORY 5 : *The Exotic Stress*

Drawing attention to superficial difference, thus opening the way for inferences of group inferiority.

strange, funny;

cannibal, head-hunters;

corroboree, bone-pointing, etc.;

warriors, tribesmen, witch doctors;

infanticide, child betrothal;

polygamy.

CATEGORY 6 : *Objects for Study and Discussion*

Frequent employment of impersonal usages such as *they, them and these people;*

The attempt to give a physical description usually in a stereotyped form - *medium stature, wavy hair, thick lips, prominent upper jaw, broad nose, etc.;*

CATEGORY 7 : *Distortion and Euphemism*

Presenting Australian history as from 1788;

Australia *discovered* and *first settled* as if the continent was uninhabited;

the pioneers;

they were *driven back into the interior* - a majority group myth;

the Aboriginal *problem*.

If this analysis has any merit, then the issues that it raises about biased learning certainly concern our various educational institutions, schools included. Bias can be learned at school, not only from social studies and history but from English, music, art and science, and indeed every other discipline to which the child is exposed. Therefore, must not schools also concern themselves with encouraging the recognition of bias?

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