

The Origins of Racism

A Marxist Perspective

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By Iggy Kim

Capitalist society claims to be at the “end of history” and to be “a democratic, humanitarian system based on fairness and reason. Yet, even in the most developed capitalist countries, racial oppression continues unabated. In the USA, the wealthiest capitalist country, African Americans continue to face severe racial oppression and in “Australia the indigenous population suffers Third World living conditions” and gross racial discrimination. Indeed in the 1990s racism has been on the rise in the USA, Europe and Australia.

A key part of the ideology and practice of racism is the mystification of what it is, its causes and how it originated. Thus, an understanding “of racism has to begin by questioning its very assumptions.

Do races exist?

Racism assumes that separate “races” of people — with clearly “definable sets of social and physical characteristics — actually “exist, have always existed and will continue to exist. But this is “a fallacy.

Firstly, there are no clear and fixed demarcations of people fitting coherent sets of physical traits. Within any racial group there are varying shades of pigmentation, body shape, hair texture, facial structure etc., as well as shared characteristics across racial divides. For instance, there are many Australian Aborigines categorised as “black” who have skin colour no darker than many southern Europeans who are “categorised as “white”.

One study concluded that 21% of people categorised as “white” in the US have some African ancestry while a great majority of those considered “black” are part-European — in some cases with more European ancestry than African.

Biology cannot provide coherent, fixed terms for the definition of “races”. Isolated genetic pools are rare in reality and don’t form the basis for racial categorisation as

socially practiced. Even if some generally consistent hereditary physical demarcations are discernable, they bear no real significance because social traits are not attached to skin or eye colour, the shape of the nose, etc. Wide cultural and historical variations exist within both “black” and “white” racial groups. For example, many Aborigines have objectively more in common with some “white” Australians than Melanesians or African Americans.

Secondly, can “races” be distinguished solely on the basis of certain socialised attributes? It would be clearly unreasonable to categorise people in “races” exclusively by musical taste, hairstyle or mode of dress yet it is precisely the nature of racism to freeze social attributes into fixed, physical traits. To legitimise this and make it possible, these social attributes have to be ideologically anchored to a biological foundation. This allows racial categorisation to appear “natural”.

In the 19th century considerable “research” was carried out in the West to give racial theories a pseudo-scientific legitimacy. Foreheads were analysed for shape and slope, noses measured, brains weighed, etc., all in the cause of proving the superiority of the “white races”.

There is no necessary link between physical differences and social characteristics but racial categorisation presupposes social significance in physical differences, inextricably binding the two together. Therefore, racial categories are purely socially founded. They are not based “on biological realities but on objectively meaningless and arbitrary selected physical traits that are neither historically nor socially fixed. Racial categorisation then isolates and fetishises these features and artificially injects them with social value.

The demarcation of distinct, socially significant “races” of people lies at the centre of racial categorisation. This demarcation does not in itself imply the division of people into inferior and superior racial groups (though that is its historical origin). More subtly, it is the very practice of according categorical significance to those physical features — such as skin colour, eye colour, hair or nose shape — that have been racialised. A deeply ingrained eye for “race” has developed in all societies where there is systematic racial oppression.

The social nature of racial categorisation is starkly seen when comparing the “white” and “black” racial categories. Those who qualify for the former must have no visible “non-white” features while the latter serves as a “genetic dumping ground”. So a person with visible signs of Aboriginal and European ancestry is still classed as “black”. Indeed the slightest visible sign of Aboriginal ancestry is sufficient to have such a person classed as “non-white”.

While the basis of racial categorisation is illusory and arbitrary, the categories

themselves are very real and govern the day-to-day lives of people. They are socially constructed categories that nonetheless polarise people into separate racial groups based on the isolation, fetishisation and reification of certain physical attributes and their injection with sets of social meanings, such as cultural traits.

Racial categorisation & the fetishism of appearance

Racial categorisation is tightly bound up with the systematic fetishisation and reification of physical appearance in bourgeois society, that is, the elevation of the form of things above their actual content and social meaning. Much broader than racism, this systematic formalism injects mere appearances with meanings of its own, independent of actual realities.

We are socialised into this formalism in an all encompassing way through fashion, the beauty industries, the packaging of goods, glossy advertising, films and novels. This fetishisation of how we look can take on a deeply sexist, homophobic, as well as a racist character.

The way a woman is measured against the glossy “ideal” of “beauty”, the way a man is valued by the degree of his masculine appearance, or the way physical attractiveness is defined with racial overtones, are not exclusively manifestations of racism, sexism and homophobia. They are also due to the ever widening fetishism of physical appearance characteristic of late capitalist society.

The source of this is the definition and generation of “ideal” images by a multi-million dollar image industry — consisting of cosmetics, advertising, fashion and media corporations — driven by profit. The very nature of this industry is to sell images with minimal concern for their social impact or the accuracy of their social representation. It exists to fetishise superficial images and elevate them above everything else in order to maximise their saleability.

Any woman suffering eating disorders or African American suffering skin problems after attempting to bleach his/her skin will readily testify to the horrific distortions of reality and the concept of “beauty” perpetrated by the image industry.

Oppressive sexual and racial ideologies are reproduced by and are agents of the fetishism of appearance. But they do not exist in an ideological vacuum. They have deeper material origins within the structure of capitalist social relations organised around the production and accumulation of profit.

As the image industry demonstrates, the fundamental fetishism of profit drives the fetishism of appearance and all other fetishes and oppressions.

Racism as a justification for oppression

Racism is the ideology which justifies the social practice of racial oppression, of institutionalised inequality based on racial categorisation. The capitalist drive for profit requires the creation of superexploited layers within the working class. Racial categorisation provides one of the means of justifying this superexploitation. By dividing people into racial groups, the superexploitation of a particular section of the work force (e.g., workers categorised as members of the “black” or the “Asian” racial groups) can be given social legitimacy.

Discriminatory employment that channels certain racial groups into the lowest paid jobs; unequal wages; the “last to hire, first to fire” system; scapegoating for the capitalist crisis; apartheid; the White Australia Policy; black deaths in custody; ghettoisation and racially defined citizenship rights are some of the forms of racial oppression. But such practices are not, in the final analysis, caused by racism. Rather racism (the idea that non-white racial groups are inferior to the white racial group) is a product of the social practice of racial oppression.

The practice of racial categorisation — which we are all socialised into — is not necessarily racist because it does not automatically create and maintain an oppressed group. However, manifestations of racial prejudice and bigotry are racist because they shore up racial oppression, that is, the system of institutionalised inequality between people based on racial categorisation.

It is also important to distinguish racial oppression from national oppression. Unlike the former, the latter is not discrimination based on the elevation of physical characteristics into social categories. Instead, national oppression is the institutionalisation of social inequality based on people's national origin.

A nation is not a racial group, since it is not formed on the basis of the social fetishism of physical features. Instead, it is a stable community of people historically constituted on the basis of a common capitalist economic life, common territory, language and social psychology manifested in a common culture.

However, bourgeois ideology has racialised the nation; national traits are ascribed to racial characteristics. Thus in the 19th and early 20th centuries, true Australians were considered to be derived from “British racial stock”.

National chauvinism can be given racial overtones. For example, during World War I, British propaganda attempted to identify the German nation with the “inferior”, “Asian” racial group through epithets like “the Hun”. Australian propaganda during World War II played on racist fears of the “yellow hordes” of Asia.

Indeed, because racism portrays the non-white racial groups as “subhuman”, racialisation has been applied by reactionaries to a range of groups to justify their

persecution. For example, in Europe the persecution of the Jews (a religious group) was racialised by falsely identifying European Jews as members of a Semite racial group (with stereotyped physical characteristics). The propaganda of the White Armies in the Russian Civil War even attempted to racialise their Communist opponents by portraying the Bolsheviks as members of the Jewish-Semitic “race”.

Since the rise of Western colonialism in the 19th century, the nationalism of all imperialist countries has been systematically racialised. Europeans, North Americans or Australians of “British stock” were presented as superior to Africans, Arabs and Asians because this justified colonial rule and imperialist exploitation. Racism was commonly used to justify colonial wars. This did not end with the granting of formal independence to many Asian, African and Middle Eastern countries after the end of World War II. For example, during the Vietnam War, American and Australian soldiers were urged on to fight the Vietnamese who were labelled “gooks” and “slopes”.

Origins of racial oppression

Racial oppression has its historical roots in the development of capitalism.

For capitalism to come into being, commodity production (the production of goods for sale as opposed to production directly for use) had to become generalised. This meant that productive resources, like land and equipment, had to be concentrated in the hands of a single social class and the majority dispossessed of them so that they would be forced to work for the capitalist class.

Thus, capitalism in its infancy was a system of coercing people from one form of labour into another. This is still the case in parts of the Third World.

For the new capitalist class in mediaeval Europe to consolidate itself, it had to accumulate the necessary money capital to take over the means of production. In this, Columbus' 1492 invasion of the Americas was decisive. The Spanish and Portuguese feudal aristocracies plundered the gold and silver of the native Americans and used this wealth to buy luxuries manufactured by the emerging bourgeoisie of England, France, Holland and Germany.

In order to plunder the gold and silver of the native Americans, and later to expropriate their tribal lands for the establishment of plantations to grow sugar, tobacco, and rice for commercial export to Europe, the European colonists exterminated enormous numbers of native Americans. In a period of 50 years from their arrival in the New World, the Spanish conquistadors exterminated 15 million native Americans. Densely populated areas like Haiti, Cuba, Nicaragua and the coast of Venezuela were completely depopulated. As a result, the European plantation owners faced an acute shortage of labour.

Some system of bonded labour was necessary to bring workers to the new lands and to force them to work thereafter for their masters. At first the landed proprietors relied upon the importation of indentured servants or serfs from the mother countries. However indentured servants proved inadequate as a reliable source of labour. Unless they were marked or branded, if they ran away they could not readily be distinguished from free colonists or their masters.

As production on the colonial plantations expanded to meet the needs of the growing capitalist industries in Europe it became increasingly urgent to find new, more abundant and more easily identifiable sources of forced labour.

The African slave trade came to the planters' rescue. "Black" slaves could be purchased cheaply and brought in unlimited numbers from the "west coast of Africa. By keeping them scattered, ignorant and terrorised the colonial planters could keep the Africans in perpetual subjugation.

Moreover, the colour of their skins made them easily identifiable, stopping them from escaping and merging with the rest of the colonial population. The colour of their skins became the sign of servitude. This was the origin of racism. Contrary to popular belief, slavery was not motivated by racism. Racism, the view that those with non-white skins were inferior to those with white skins, was gradually elaborated to justify the particular form of slave labour that was introduced in the Americas by a rising capitalism.

Chattel slavery and the slave trade existed long before the European conquest of the Americas. It was a familiar institution in feudal Spain and Portugal. The Spaniards in particular were accustomed to enslaving the peoples they conquered. Many Spanish vessels engaged in the slave trade and carried African slaves in their crews. Indeed, Columbus had African slaves in his crew on his first voyage across the Atlantic. However, serfdom not chattel slavery constituted the productive basis of Spanish and Portuguese feudal society. Slavery co-existed in the crevices of feudal life.

Nor was the enslavement of "non-white" peoples by Spanish and Portuguese feudal rulers justified on racist lines. Rather the differences between slaves and slave-owners were, at first, defined by religion — Christians versus "heathens". The non-white peoples the Spanish and Portuguese enslaved were all "infidels", subject by divine law to serve Christian masters. As late as the middle of the 15th century, when the slave trade to Portugal first began, the ideological rationalisation for the enslavement of Africans was not that they were dark skinned but that they were not Christians.

But a distinction between people based on religious beliefs eventually proved to be a problem because the distinction between Christians and "heathens" could not be

frozen over generations. Moreover, the Portuguese and Spanish feudal rulers' social control of colonised peoples depended on their conversion to Christianity (the dominant ideology of these ruling elites). Many Africans during the early slave trade in Portugal did just that and were subsequently freed and intermarried with the Portuguese.

However once skin colour became an important social category injected with the meaning of enslavement, it seemed "natural" for dark-skinned peoples to occupy a subordinate social status. In the racist mode of reasoning then, the next logical step was to conclude that, somehow, blacks must have been "naturally" inferior to whites.

Such a view was particularly necessary for justifying the use of slave labour by the capitalist plantation owners in the southern states of the USA. The existence of white slavery was clearly in contradiction to the bourgeois-democratic ideology enshrined in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America ("We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable [sic] Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness ...").

But the enslavement of blacks could be reconciled with bourgeois-democratic ideology through the propagation of the racist idea that people of African descent were not "men", but "childlike" subhumans undeserving of equal rights. (A similar argument was used to deny white women equal rights with white adult males.)

Even after the abolition of chattel slavery in the late 19th century, racism served the interests of capitalism by justifying the maintenance of a layer of superexploited wage labourers. In fact, the propagation of racist ideas became more pronounced after the abolition of chattel slavery. With the emancipation of blacks slaves in the USA, their transformation into a superexploited layer of waged workers required the introduction of a system of legalised subjugation (segregation) that would effectively nullify their status as "free" labourers and justify the denial of the equal rights that they were formally entitled to under the US constitution.

The introduction of the apartheid-like system of racial segregation in the USA in the 1890s also coincided with the colonial subjugation of Africa and Asia by the industrialised capitalist nations. Racism thus became a useful ideological justification for imperialist expansionism.

This connection is illustrated graphically by a comment made in the liberal US magazine *The Nation* in 1898 about a Supreme Court decision upholding the denial of voting rights to African Americans in the southern states. The article called it "an interesting coincidence that this important decision is rendered at a time when we are considering the idea of taking in a varied assortment of inferior races in different parts of the world which, of course, could not be allowed to vote." (Cited in Peter Camejo,

Racism, Revolution, Reaction: The Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction, Monad Press: New York, 1976, p. 212.)

Two other factors assisted the advance of racist ideas in the 19th century. The expansion of the European capitalism to include huge colonial empires in Asia and Africa and the development of early theories of human evolution. Gross manipulation of the latter helped justify the new global oppressive relations brought into being with the former. It became both necessary and possible for capitalist ideologists to assert “scientific” proof of the superiority of the “white” over the “coloured” peoples.

History of racism in Australia

While the European invasion of Australia was part of the global expansion of capitalism it was exceptional in one vital respect. It was not motivated by the need for natural resources or labour. Australia began as a penal colony. In fact early Dutch and French explorers — potential invaders — did not see the continent as a viable colonial possession.

The initial lack of an expansionary motive and economic value in the colonisation of Australia excluded the need for a *systematically* racist relationship between Aborigines and their colonial oppressors. The distinction between settlers and Aborigines was at first justified with notions of “civilisation” and “savagery”, not unlike the distinction between Christians and “heathens”. This explains the initial apparently liberal if patronising official attitude of the early colonial authorities towards Aborigines. This did not prevent considerable violence towards the indigenous people on the ground and the dramatic impact of European settlement in terms of starvation and disease for thousands of Aborigines.

It was only with the establishment of significant pastoral interests in the early 1800s and the gold rushes and Queensland sugar plantations of the mid-1800s that a coherent social practice of racial oppression emerged against the indigenous population. It was based on the systematic land expropriation of the Aborigines.

A “dying race” theory proclaimed that the superior white race would soon render the Aborigines historically obsolete. This legitimised not only the continuous removal of Aborigines from more and more land, but also their massacre and confinement on reserves. Already decimated by diseases like smallpox, introduced by the European settlers, the Aboriginal population was subjected to a new holocaust of violence and starvation.

Aborigines were slaughtered by regular “hunting” parties, poisoned and starved by being forced off the land they had lived on for thousands of years.

Tens of thousands of Aboriginal children were forcibly taken away from their

parents and put into camps to be trained as domestics, labourers or stockmen and women — a policy fully abandoned less than three decades ago. In remote areas, large agricultural empires were built with the labour of Aborigines who were “paid” only with meagre rations of tea, sugar and flour. When these station owners were finally asked by law to pay wages to their Aboriginal workers in the late 1960s these workers were sacked *en masse* and driven off the land.

The severe social consequences of racial oppression of the Aboriginal people are plain to see even today:

- Aborigines suffer an average life expectancy 18 to 20 years lower than other Australians.
- The unemployment rate for Aborigines is 38% — 50% for those aged 15-19 and 46% for those aged 20 to 24 — even though thousands are made to work for the dole, a “privilege” not available to other Australians.
- Infant mortality rates for Aborigines are 2-3 times that of the rest of the Australian population.
- Aborigines are imprisoned at 14 times that of the rest of the population and some 100 Aborigines died in police custody or prison in the first half of the 1990s.

No other group in Australian society suffers this degree of systematic racial oppression. Today's chief beneficiaries of early capital accumulation — the powerful pastoral agribusinesses and mining monopolies — are the social base of the continuing racism against the indigenous people of Australia.

Racism & the labour aristocracy

Another social base of racism in Australia is the labour aristocracy. The labour aristocracy is that privileged layer of workers (better paid and more secure), exclusive to the wealthy imperialist countries, which ultimately seeks to conciliate with the bosses at the expense of the workers as a whole.

In Australia, the labour aristocracy's traditional political vehicle is the Australian Labor Party, but it's not limited to it. The labour aristocracy has used racism and nationalism to safeguard its privileged position against migrant workers and ensure a seat at the bosses' table, even if it's only for the leftovers.

The forebears of the Labor Party spearheaded the development of a virulently racist nationalism in the late 1800s. Its crowning success was the “white Australia” policy of excluding non-white immigrants and denying equal rights to Asians and Pacific Islanders already resident in the country. Laborism and the Australian federation were both founded on this racist policy.

Anti-Asian racism in Australia has roots in the 1850s gold rushes when waves of

Chinese arrived to seek their fortunes. In conditions of naturally scarce gold deposits and relative shortage of capital the Chinese were a competitive threat to the white miners. So while white miners of various nationalities abounded, the Chinese were picked out and scapegoated in acts of organised racist violence and intimidation.

This was also a period of struggle over the colonial vote. On one side stood the white farmers and wage workers fighting for universal male suffrage; on the other the pastoralists, merchants and bankers defending the vote for property owners only. The radical democratic fervour was accompanied by a vile, petty-minded type of hostility to the Chinese.

This seeming contradiction was resolved when the colonial rulers coopted and contained the radical democratic momentum by enacting laws excluding Chinese immigration and granting limited political reforms. This reinforced white workers' identification with ruling colonial interests; they, too, saw their future in an economically strong colony, prosperous and dominant in the region.

The racist alliance between big bosses, the middle class and the labour aristocracy embarked on a new stage in the 1880s. An economic boom in the 1860s coincided with the end of assisted immigration from Britain resulting in a shortage of skilled labour. As the balance of power shifted in favour of the workers the white labour aristocracy renewed the attack on the Chinese.

The vehemence of this movement was demonstrated by the Queensland Shearers' Union which not only excluded non-white workers but also denied membership to any white shearer who worked for anyone who employed Chinese, had commercial dealings with Chinese or patronised any merchant or storekeeper who dealt with or employed Chinese. Hostility towards bosses was only against those who hired Chinese workers and were condemned as "white Chinamen".

This second wave of the anti-Chinese movement heated up with the 1878 strike by white sailors of the Australasian Steam Navigation Company. They demanded the exclusion of Hong Kong sailors hired at less than a third of the white pay.

The strike gained wide support throughout the colonies. In Australia, mass meetings of white workers, shop keepers, professionals and politicians collected money for the strike fund. White employers who hired Chinese workers were publicly identified. Coal miners in Wollongong stopped supplying coal to the Australasian Steam Navigation Company. The strike was won when the Queensland colonial government threatened to cancel a mail contract with the company and award it to shipping firms which hired white labour only.

In subsequent years the Australian Republican Association, labour federations, trades and labour councils and many individual unions adopted resolutions against

the Chinese as part of their general platforms.

Despite the fact that the first strike on the Darling Downs was waged by Chinese coolies the myth that “servile” workers of colour undermine Australian working conditions was preached systematically by the racist Laborites.

White Australian nationalism

Racism became all important in forging an Australian nationalism that could cement white workers' identification with the ruling class, thereby confining workers' demands to those acceptable to the powers-that-be and preventing the rise of a working-class movement aware of its own independent political interests.

Both the anti-Chinese rabble and the 1860s economic boom peaked in 1888. In March the Inter-colonial Trades Union Congress passed resolutions against Chinese workers. In the first half of that year, mass protests against the Chinese intensified in all the colonies, with one in Sydney attracting 40,000 people on June 3.

At a time when the working class was highly organised and mobilised, the ruling class deflected workers' demands towards convenient scapegoats. Hence, during an anti-Chinese riot of 1000 people in Brisbane, the police made no attempt to intervene, and afterwards, arrested only one man for disorderly conduct.

White chauvinism was central to the radical nationalism of union journals like the *Worker*, the popular writings of Henry Lawson and the *Bulletin* “magazine. With the ruling class's active promotion, racism negated existing egalitarian sentiments and dampened any potential for a movement which consistently championed working-class interests.

As the different colonial elites began to develop joint national interests “and merge into a single class in the 1880s, ruling class commentators began to agitate for a federated nation-state. One of the first nationally coordinated colonial policies was in the area of immigration. On June 12, 1888, the six colonial premiers met in Sydney to assemble uniform legislation against migrants of colour. White Australia became formal national policy.

Racism and nationalism further intensified in the 1890s, especially with the onset of a severe economic depression in 1891. A key plank in the platforms of the various Laborite groups (which eventually formed into the Labor Party) was commitment to a “white Australia”.

This vile policy became federal law when the Immigration Restriction Act was passed, led by the Labor Party, at the time of federation. The act not only barred people of colour from coming into Australia; it also denied citizenship to those already resident in the country, even those born here. The Labor leader at the time, J.C.

Watson, said during the parliamentary discussion: “The objection I have to the mixing of these coloured people with the white people of Australia — although I admit it is to a large extent tinged with considerations of an industrial nature — lies in the main in the possibility and probability of racial contamination.”

The 1905 federal platform of the ALP stated as its chief objective “the cultivation of an Australian sentiment based upon the maintenance of racial purity”. Both the fighting and general platforms of the party placed the “maintenance of a white Australia” as the first plank.

This racism easily translated into an imperial view of the world. For instance, the 1910 federal election manifesto of the Victorian Labor Party stated: “When a majority of the people of the principal nations, such as the USA, Germany and Great Britain, are converted to the Labor Gospel, war as we know it will cease. The only use for armies and navies then will be to police the world and keep the small and less civilised nations in order.”

In the decades following federation, the ruling class gained further strength, on the one hand by consolidating its state machine, and on the other by tying the labour aristocracy more directly to its interests. In both, the Labor Party was crucial. The 1910 Fisher Labor government established the national currency, postal system, transcontinental railway and the army and navy. The Curtin government presided over austerity measures during the Second World War. It was Labor which best championed the “national interest”.

During the postwar boom, the Chifley Labor government was used to bring in migrants from southern Europe to feed the bosses’ hunger for super-cheap labour. Just as convicts were needed to give the colonies a kick-start, migrants were needed to expand manufacturing industries in the postwar period.

This mass immigration program went hand in hand with a stricter application of racial criteria. Labor’s immigration minister, Arthur Calwell, even denied entry to Japanese spouses of Australian military personnel. He also argued that defence against the “yellow peril”, as well as economic growth, depended on more Europeans settling the country — something the pure British stock could not achieve alone. Australia was either to “populate or perish” before the “yellow hordes”.

The Communist challenge

While racist Labor dominated working-class history in this country, it did not go unchallenged.

The Communist Party of Australia (CPA) offered the most significant opposition to Labor racism upon its founding in 1920. Inspired by the Russian revolution, the

CPA spearheaded solidarity with Chinese working people in the late 1920s, support for the Spanish republicans in the 1930s and boycotts of Dutch ships in the 1940s on request from Indonesian workers fighting for independence. In all these initiatives, the CPA clashed head-on with the racist and chauvinist Laborites.

When the ACTU was formed in 1927, under mainly Communist leadership, it affiliated to the Pan-Pacific Secretariat, an initiative of the Communist International, which was made up of a majority of parties from non-white countries. When the PPS condemned the White Australia Policy as “viciously anti-working class”, the ACTU leadership pledged to “tear down the barriers that heretofore separated the toiling masses of the East from the labour movement of the West, and all the racial and national prejudice artificially created by imperialists “and their hirelings”’.

At this, the Laborites, led by the Australian Workers Union, were outraged. The AWU appealed to Labor parliamentarians to renew their commitment to white Australia. Scullin, then the ALP leader, replied that Labor “was stronger than ever for the policy”.

In the 1930s, Communist workers were sent to Kalgoorlie in Western Australia to counter the chauvinist attacks by Laborites on Italian and Slav miners. Armed with their party newspaper and a pamphlet written specifically for the occasion, this handful of young militants was so successful that one of them, Jock Findlay, was later elected secretary of the local AWU, which for so long had been used by the ALP to organise against the migrant miners.

During the same period, Italian sugarcane cutters in northern Queensland, many of them left-wing escapees from Mussolini, were experiencing the same attacks from the local Labor Party and the AWU. Again, the bold actions of the CPA smashed chauvinist barriers and built solidarity between Anglo and Italian cutters, isolating the Laborites in the process.

Through the 1940s and ’50s, Communist workers aided struggles for equal wages by Aboriginal pastoral workers in the Kimberleys and the Northern Territory. This was possibly the most courageous defiance of the white Australia ethos that then bonded the main classes of Australian society.

Impact of 1960s radicalisation

In the 1960s, numerous international impulses further eroded the white Australia consciousness: the US civil rights movement, the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, the growing Aboriginal land rights movement and the anti-colonial revolutions in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

These struggles won the support of many Australian workers, students and

intellectuals. The support consolidated around opposition to the Australian and US aggression against Vietnam and developed into the mass radicalisation of the late 1960s.

In response, the Labor Party was forced to revamp its image and find new methods of containing and coopting the workers' movement. Racism was no longer as useful as it had been half a century earlier and, "almost overnight, the Whitlam leadership was transformed.

It is not widely known that Gough Whitlam initially supported Australia's intervention in Vietnam in 1965. At the 1965 federal Labor conference, Whitlam used Calwell's opposition to the war (among other things) to oust him from the Labor leadership. It was only after mass opposition to Australia's role in Vietnam skyrocketed in the late 1960s that Whitlam switched sides.

Whitlam did differ with Calwell on the White Australia Policy, but he was motivated by only one thing: big business interests. New supplies of migrant labour had to be found because traditional European sources were drying up, and trade with Asia was increasing.

Calwell's old-fashioned desire to protect white workers' privileges was replaced by Whitlam's more far-sighted drive into Asian markets and supplies of cheap labour. This signalled the birth of Labor's new nationalism: an ideological liberalism that is meant to make everyone feel warm and fuzzy while they're being shafted.

At the same time as it introduced multiculturalism into Australian government policy, the Whitlam government in 1972 reduced the migrant intake from 140,000 per year to 110,000. When the first multicultural immigration minister, Al Grassby, lost his seat in the May 1974 election after a racist backlash, Whitlam quickly replaced him with Clyde Cameron, one of the Anglophile Laborite old guard. Later that year, Cameron and Whitlam further cut the migrant intake to 80,000 — nearly half the figure at the beginning of Labor's term.

The next Labor prime minister, Bob Hawke, continued the attack. In 1984 he abolished the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs, cut funding for language programs and reduced multicultural education in schools. Only after a concerted protest from migrant communities (reminding him of all those potential Labor voters), did Hawke reinstate some funding and establish new advisory bodies. Similarly, when his 1983 Aboriginal land rights proposals were greeted by a savagely racist advertising blitzkrieg from the mining bosses, he quickly dropped them.

Then, under the Keating Labor leadership, there were continuing deaths of Aborigines in custody, the shameful saga of Indochinese refugees imprisoned indefinitely in remote detention centres, the continuing denial of certain overseas

qualifications, the imposition of a six-month waiting period for social security payments for new immigrants and the violation of the sacred site at the old Swan Brewery by a WA Labor government. All this beneath the happy gloss of multiculturalism and Aboriginal reconciliation.

Limits of multiculturalism

To some extent, the policy of multiculturalism did ideologically challenge “the crudest traditions of white Australia, and there’s no doubting the cosmopolitan advances in urban lifestyle. But at the bottom of it all, multiculturalism has served one overriding aim — facilitating Australian big business penetration of the Asian markets and labour supply, and forging a new national image in order to sharpen that penetration.

At the same time as formally ending the White Australia Policy, Whitlam reaffirmed the former Liberal government’s ties with Indonesia’s dictatorial Suharto regime and actively encouraged Indonesia’s invasion of East Timor in 1975. Then, on the basis of multiculturalism’s celebration of difference and diversity, Hawke and Keating repeatedly argued for greater understanding of the “different” cultural approaches to democracy and human rights in Asia. (Never mind that many Indonesian working people don’t accept Suharto’s allegedly “inherently Asian” “approach.) Becoming more “neighbourly” has been smoothly compatible with the manufacture of new Asian stereotypes which are racist in their own right.

Multiculturalists’ fetish of ethnic differences has led them to artificially lump together all migrant and racial groups into static cultural categories, regardless of class or other divisions within these groups. Multiculturalism then elevates these categories into fixed differences. So, Asians are always and inherently authoritarian and obedient to authority, and Aborigines are always and inherently spiritual, the modern “noble savages”.

These stereotypes fit nicely with traditional racist myths such as Asians are happy to work for low wages (and undermine Australian workers’ wages), or “real” Aborigines are found only in the bush, their urban counterparts having been ruined by white culture which they simply can’t hope to understand or take part in (for example, they “can’t handle white fellas’ drink”, they’re “prone to idleness”, etc.).

Such grotesque myths have justified seemingly contradictory racial policies: white Australia (hostility to cheap coloured labour) versus Australian big business in Asia (“friendliness” to cheap coloured labour), and “protection” of indigenous Australians (segregation in reserves and the “let-them-die-quietly” approach) versus assimilation (“the force “civilising mission”). These myths have survived more than 20 years of multiculturalism precisely because multiculturalism has simply transformed and

accommodated the myths rather than destroyed them.

This isn't to say that multiculturalism is some devious plot by Anglo-Australia. Multiculturalism probably would have failed disastrously without the enthusiastic collusion of migrant and Aboriginal bureaucrats who did nicely out of the Labor (and the Fraser Liberal) governments. With all its hype about different foods and Asian trade, multiculturalism has been a nice earner for the migrant business class, at the expense of the many non-English speaking background workers still trapped on the lower rungs.

In foreign policy, too, Labor's "it's their culture" approach drew applause from the region's dictators, most notably from Lee Kuan Yew (the former PM of Singapore, home to the world's longest serving political prisoner) and, of course, from Suharto.

Multicultural nationalism

While multiculturalism may be obsessed with difference, it must still "maintain national unity if it is to serve the Australian corporate class. So the other side of the multicultural coin is the very powerful ideology of social cohesion or, more accurately, Australian nationalism.

Migrants of all racial and ethnic backgrounds are expected, under multiculturalism, to unquestioningly accept Australian "national interests" and be grateful to their new homeland — or go back to where they came from.

Especially important is that migrants from oppressed nations leave behind "ethnic tensions" upon coming to Australia. In recent years, this message has been particularly directed against Croat- and Arab-Australians, but also against the Irish in the past. There's nothing more annoying for politicians and the ruling class than migrants bringing "their" politics into the country, especially if it includes such anti-establishment ideas as anti-imperialism, worker self-organisation and self-determination.

Multicultural nationalism is like an unconditional tolerance of everything deemed "culturally diverse" or "different", including regional dictators, Israeli colonialism, Serbian atrocities and US invasions — everything, that is, except "un-Australianness" as defined by the bosses' media and servants in government.

It was Keating who best articulated this new, supposedly "plural" and "tolerant" Australian nationalism by weaving together multiculturalism, republicanism and Aboriginal reconciliation. This new nationalism was an integral part of Labor's main goal of forging a class consensus and wider social cohesion at a time when big business was ferociously restructuring to become internationally competitive, cutting back wages, jobs and social services in the process.

While class consensus and republicanism have traditionally been central to Labor's

nationalism, Keating introduced the new elements of multiculturalism and Aboriginal reconciliation. This more “sophisticated” nationalism tried to erase the Neanderthal crudeness of white Australia while preserving a strong national chauvinism in the Australian working class.

The problem for Labor, however, was that Australian nationalism had, for nearly a century, been staunchly racial in character. Until the immediate postwar period, when southern Europeans were granted the privilege of being “new Australians”, only those with fair complexion (“pure British stock” and other northern Europeans) were welcomed as immigrants. Australian immigration officials sent to Europe to select immigrants from the large refugee camps were instructed to favour entry for those of “Aryan stock”.

Successive Liberal and Labor governments have since tried to forcibly mesh migrants into the new national fabric, first through assimilation and then through multiculturalism. But as long as nationalism and the profit motive are the basic driving forces, racism will always be ready to be deployed any time the corporate class wants to wage a war for oil or steal more land from Aborigines, or needs to find a bogey for its austerity campaign.

Moreover, in a context of escalating suffering by the working class as big business demands more and more austerity — even lower wages, less public service delivery and fewer social supports — warmth and fuzziness of multicultural republicanism can be stretched only so far. Rusty old “white Australia” may yet prove to be a more effective method of diversion, division and containment of the working class than the multicultural model with its slick exterior.

How racism can be eliminated

As racism has a material base in real oppressive social relations it cannot be effectively combated simply through education campaigns about the fallacies of racial stereotypes or through appeals for tolerance. Effective racist campaigns must oppose the actual racist policies being carried out in society, such as the denial of land rights to Aborigines, racist law enforcement, discrimination in employment, attacks on the rights of refugees and immigration cuts.

Racism is used by the capitalist ruling class as a weapon of divide and rule against the working class but this can be thwarted by enlisting the broadest forces in independent mass mobilisations against racist policies. Any attempt to organise such mobilisations in imperialist countries like Australia will come up against not only the ruling class and its hirelings but also those forces that seek to preserve the privileged position of the predominantly white labour aristocracy.

Racism cannot be completely eliminated until the capitalist system is replaced by a democratic socialist society because capitalism has been built on the oppressive social relations that underlie racism. Capitalism survives on the basis of the rule of an ever shrinking but increasingly wealthy minority. It needs to divide the majority in order to continue its rule and to do this has to perpetuate racism, sexism and national chauvinism.

Even after more than two centuries of “democratic” capitalism the USA has not been able to eliminate racism — instead it is on the “rise. Yet a small and poor Third World country, Cuba, has eliminated racial oppression in a way its wealthy and powerful capitalist neighbour has not and can not. Cuba suffered the racist legacy of black slavery — just as did the USA — but the Cuban Revolution got rid of its capitalist ruling class and in a few years abolished racial discrimination.

However, racist ideas and prejudice cannot be totally abolished through changes in a single country. As long as the world is divided into a few wealthy, predominantly white, exploiter nations and a majority of non-white exploited Third World nations, there will remain a material basis for racism. Racism justifies global inequality and exploitation. Until this exploitative world order is replaced by one based on international solidarity and the priority of social needs over private profit, the battle against racism will not be over. ■

Resistance books