British subjects their legal entitlements, so too, the Howard Government blatantly refuses to conform its handling of refugees to the UN Conventions by which Australia is legally bound. Moreover, in full accord with the image of the subversive foreigner that we have just sketched, the Government’s current refugee policies register its unwillingness to recognise the detention centre asylum seekers in their capacity as property-owning subjects. This is reflected in the fact that asylum seekers have been denied any right to work, even though they might have been beneficially incorporated into the system of production and consumption. As policy critics have already pointed out, the New Australian instead, to pursue options that are detrimental to the national economy (Lock et al, 2002, p. 36; McMaster, 2002, p. 6).

The parallels with the old image of the European immigrant as a subversive foreigner do not end here. In the past the Australian authorities also assigned to all non-British immigrants an assumed predisposition for leftist political ideas (Dutton, 1998, p. 99). This rendered an individual’s actual behaviour, or that of his or her particular national or ethnic group, as irrelevant to the question of whether he or she could expect from the Australian state. Given this definitional logic, any migrant could be identified as a subversive just by virtue of having immigrated. This ensured that the category of the subversive foreigner could always be filled by an immigrant body no matter what else the state of play.

Today the issue of temporary protection visas bears the very same mark of rendering a certain class of immigrant bodies as perpetually available to be singled out for discriminatory treatment by the Australian state. Commentators have drawn attention to the unjustifiable restrictions and unacceptable uncertainties to which the current holders of temporary protection visas are being subjected (Lock et al, 2002, p. 39; Mansouri, 2002). But, from an historical perspective, what is even more disturbing is our complacency towards what appears to be a new mechanism for implementing an old form of state authoritarianism.

In the guise of the subversive, the foreigner-within could always be rendered fully visible to the white Australian authorities and society. Full visibility enabled the construction of the ‘territorial’ authority and the latter was doubtless indispensable to the foreigner’s anxiety-relieving presence. Previously the all-pervasive state surveillance and control of immigrant lives took the forms of compulsory registration, restrictions on movement, internment and deportation (Dutton, 1998, Macintyre, 1999). The former of the two off-shore, or on-detention centres, whether on or off-shore, could be seen to play precisely the same role of locating for white Australians the visible foreigner-within. Lock et al (2002, p. 37) have already argued that the outsourcing of detention to the Government to retain power over refugees’ lives at the same time as it distances itself from any responsibility. In the past Australian governments achieved a similar result with their target foreigner groups through a different practice. They consistently supported and reinforced the internal policing mechanisms that operated within the communities that functioned as the subversive foreigner sites of the times (Nicolaoupolous & Vassilacopoulos, 2002b).

The expression of such acts of loyalty could in turn give rise to a recognition of the foreigner as a property-owning identity. This qualified the Southern European to legitimate white Australian authority by engagement in the processes of mutual recognition. Read through this understanding of the historical significance of the compliant foreigner image, the current rhetoric surrounding Australia’s response to refugees who hold valid entry visas can be seen as yet another reminder of the importance to white Australians of perpetuating the notion of the foreigner-within.

Together the interplay of the images of the subversive and the compliant foreigner provide a framework in which Southern European immigrants of the past, like asylum seekers today, retain their position as perpetual foreigners-within. Those who ultimately become naturalised and live the better part of their productive lives in Australia become white enough to count as formal subjects whose property-owning identity can be recognised. Still, neither Southern European immigrant nor the compliant foreigner-within nor refugees (Mansouri, 2002) are ever ‘white’ enough to receive the very same privileges of white citizenship that are afforded to the dominant white Australian. This flows from an on-going need to retain the foreigner’s residual racialised difference from the dominant white Australian (Dutton, 1998, Macintyre, 1999). By identifying the shared position of two otherwise distinct forms as the ‘other,’ members of an ethnic ‘threat’ in an ethnic conflict situation. The signs of intercultural understanding that are also visible and audible can be supported and strengthened by strategies of intercultural learning that do not deny essentialism its voice, but use it as a starting point towards deconstructing identification markers. The aim is to transcend the superficial acknowledgement of difference and turn it into an urgency for human rights and social justice.

Essentialism is a term used by many contemporary social theorists in a negative way, and many describe their central position as anti-essentialism. Since I will argue a case for the deconstructing of essentialism in this study it is important to look at the term itself and the reasons for its rejection in postmodern theoretical thinking. Essentialism is usually described as follows: ‘Essentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the “whatness” of a given entity (Fuss, 1998, p. 1).

If essentialism is deployed to describe the identity of a person, the observer will assume that there are unchangeable features of this person, his or her position in the world in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, religion and so on. The assumption further contains a certain essence at the core of each of those categories. This means not only that once categorised ‘refugee,’ an assumed identity will then carry this fixed identifier, but also that the identifier is loaded with equally fixed descriptors in the mind of an essentialist observer. An exemplary identity could then be analysed as ‘Moslem, Middle-Eastern, female,’ whereby each identifier is thereby assigned an assumed identity which is loaded with equally fixed descriptors in the mind of an essentialist observer. An exemplary identity could then be analysed as ‘Moslem, Middle-Eastern, female,’ whereby each identifier is
understood to have a set of expected behavioural, social, and cognitive patterns as its fundamental descriptors. As a result, identity becomes a mixture of unreflective essential features at the core of every person. This is a particularly problematic viewpoint, as Liz Bondi indicates: ‘Reliance upon apparently pre-given categories of class, sex, race, ethnicity, and so on [invokes] a conception of identity as something to be acknowledged or uncorrected rather than constructed, as something fixed rather than changing’ (Bondi, 1993, p. 93). The negative effect of this is an assumption of an essential behaviour or performance connected with one person or group, actively blockin
Moreover, as Mares (2001, p. 149) points out, the ‘queue jumper’ image of the asylum seeker supplies a marketable justification for the current Government policies.

This image can be read in at least two ways. One is that Australians’ sense of fairness to all would-be Australians pushes in the direction of tough measures. However, the political message alerts us to the operation of a more pervasive phenomenon. This is the phenomenon of an Australian public that is some noteworthy extent unwilling to be moved by the force of the better argument. Somewhere deeper is at stake.

To be sure, racist attitudes and xenophobic feelings play their part. This is reflected in the differences of official response to refugees and the mainly ‘white’ European over-stayers as well as in the relative success rates of applications for refugee status and humanitarian visas (Lock et al., 2002, p. 36). Of course, the public reaction has not been indifferent to the national and ethnic origins of the asylum seekers (McMaster, 2001, pp. 127-160). But racism and xenophobia are mere symptoms of the problem. Indeed, we want to suggest that we need to shift our reflective and critical focus away from individual-centred psychological explanations about Australians’ attitudes and feelings. So, instead of examining the ways in which we react to the unwelcome presence of others, in the next section we will outline our understanding of the conditions that can render such reactions seemingly meaningful and appropriate to us as white Australians.

White Australia’s Ontological Disturbance and the Perpetual Foreigner

Elsewhere we have argued that the white Australian way of being has been profoundly shaped by the dispossession of the indigenous peoples (2002a). Through this on-going dispossession white Australians claim their ownership of the land and thus control of Australian state authorities at the same time as retaining him or her as a social outsider. As this kind of foreigner-within, the (im)migrant is at once like us in aspiring to the benefits of Australian citizenship and unlike us in that she can claim no right to such belonging. This is the incompatibility of the two indispensable qualities of the perpetual foreigner. Moreover, the perpetual foreigner is a socially reinforced subject position. It is ascribed to different (im)migrant groups at different historical moments. Still, its enduring feature is that it is not an attribute of a network of derived identities, but that it is the only way to deeply question the validity of these identities. Essentialism here serves as a contextual aid to locate different representations of the other, the foreigner must be marked in a way that the incompatibility of the two indispensable qualities combines two indispensable identities. Even so, white Australians cannot receive this indispensable form of recognition from the indigenous peoples who remain dispossessed. Thus, the only way to receive such recognition is to engage in a crucial form of mutual recognition has resulted in what we can call an ontological disturbance, a disturbance of the conditions that give coherent meaning to our being as white Australian. In response to this ontological disturbance dominant white Australia must invoke a suitable ‘other’ to legitimate its authority and to alleviate the anxiety that the original theft of the land produces.

In conclusion, it is why white Australia must invoke the notion of ‘the perpetual foreigner’. That the ‘representation’ of the perpetual foreigner combines two indispensable yet incommensurable qualities. These are a property-owning identity and a residual racialised difference from the dominant white Australian. That is, on the one hand, the foreigner must be positioned as a modern subject who has the potential to become fully absorbed into the social network of commodity production and circulation. On the other, the foreigner must be marked in a way that renders foreignness readily visible. The characteristic of a property-owning identity qualifies the foreigner to supply recognition whereas that of racialised difference retains him or her in the position of the ‘other’ whose presence plays an indispensable anxiety-relieving role. For this reason the perpetual foreigner must be ‘white-but-not-white-enough’. This tension is generated through the incompatibility of the two indispensable qualities of the perpetual foreigner.

Moreover, the perpetual foreigner is a socially reinforced subject position. It is ascribed to different (im)migrant groups at different historical moments. Still, its enduring feature is that it is not an attribute of a network of derived identities, but that it is the only way to deeply question the validity of these identities. Essentialism here serves as a contextual aid to locate different representations of the other, the foreigner must be marked in a way that the incompatibility of the two indispensable qualities combines two indispensable identities. Even so, white Australians cannot receive this indispensable form of recognition from the indigenous peoples who remain dispossessed. Thus, the only way to receive such recognition is to engage in a crucial form of mutual recognition has resulted in what we can call an ontological disturbance, a disturbance of the conditions that give coherent meaning to our being as white Australian. In response to this ontological disturbance dominant white Australia must invoke a suitable ‘other’ to legitimate its authority and to alleviate the anxiety that the original theft of the land produces.

In Australia, for many people refugees are... members of an ‘ethnic threat’

The heart of the problem lies, instead, in our way of being, our ontology.

In any ethnic conflict situation, identity has more to do with identification than with choice, and we can see the limitations individuals have to face in their choices. Although essentialism as such is a concept that might be out of place to describe the identity choices of the postmodern subject, it serves a justified role in bringing essentially thinking people together. It is a common ground around which to rally and from which to begin the journey. Situated in specific historical and political local contexts, the deconstruction of essentialist thinking can be used strategically and productively as an emancipatory move.

conclusion

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there is a need to re-acknowledge the urgency of expanding our world view to incorporate plural ways of interpreting the present-day conflicts. This might be a suitable preparatory path to more democratic processes. The consolidation of different world views can be identified as a priority goal in establishing non-violent multi-ethnic and poly-cultural societies.

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Asylum seekers and the Concept of the Foreigner

Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos

The arrival of the latest wave of asylum seekers has generated, and will no doubt continue to generate, invaluable public and intellectual discussion about the proper extent of Australia’s responsibilities to the world’s growing number of refugees. Indeed, there are already many strong publicly advocated moral, legal and political arguments that advance a reasonable position on the narrowness of our responsibilities to asylum seekers who have already arrived in Australia: namely, that we should not subject such people to mandatory detention or issue temporary protection visas to them. The arguments in support of this position have drawn attention to the breaches of international law; the human rights violations; and to the fact that current policies effectively reinforce a race-based immigration agenda that is supposed to have been long abandoned (HREOC, 1998; Mansouri, 2002; Lock et al, 2002; McMaster, 2002). Even so, what we might call the force of the better argument has not been effective enough to produce an abandonment of the current policies of mandatory detention and temporary protection visas.

Our aim in this paper is to offer an explanation of the apparent unwillingness of Australians sufficiently to be moved to adopt the above mentioned reasonable position. In the first section we will give some reasons for re-focusing the terms of such an explanation away from individual-centred psychological accounts of Australians’ racist attitudes and xenophobic feelings. We will suggest that the heart of the problem lies, instead, in our way of being, our ontology. In the present context ‘our way of being as white Australians’ refers not just to our individual or group interpretations and conscious understandings of our situation, but to the culturally and institutionally reinforced practices that generate and maintain our sense of being Australian. These are practices that operate at both conscious and unconscious levels. There are many different and competing understandings of what it means to be Australian but for the purposes of this paper we will limit our discussion to what we take to be the dominant culturally and institutionally reinforced construction of being white Australian. In the second section we will outline the main elements of this construction in order to explain its dependence on what we call the ‘foreigner-within’. In the final section we will argue that, when we turn our attention to the problematic nature of our collective being as white Australians, we find some remarkable similarities in the way white Australia has positioned the asylum seekers today and the Southern European foreign communities prior to official multiculturalism. Both groups can be seen to conform to the conception of the foreigner-within.

Racist and xenophobic attitudes as more symptoms

The adoption of official multiculturalism marked the transition to a society in which the racism and xenophobia that underpinned the institutionalisation of White Australia at Federation would no longer be tolerated publicly. Writers of Australian history sometimes associate this change in official policy with the idea that Australians progressively became a less racist and xenophobic people (Chesterman & Galligan, 1999; Jupp, 2002). But every so often we are faced with the resurfacing of racist and xenophobic anxieties in public immigration debates. As the last Federal election demonstrated so powerfully with Tampa, these reactions are not restricted to a small, if vocal, section of the population. Such events lead us to ask what it is about us as Australians that blinds us to what are very obviously reasonable and publicly rehearsed arguments for the humane treatment of people irrespective of how they arrive in Australia. We do not mean to deny that strong public opinion about such issues can be radically reversed. Misleading media representations, politically motivated misinformation and unfamiliarity with the facts surrounding the treatment of asylum seekers certainly play their part in influencing the public opinion of the moment. Even so, it is still appropriate to ask why we are not immediately offended in sufficiently large numbers and why we are not more effectively vocal in our condemnation of the conditions to which today’s asylum seekers are being subjected by Australian authorities.

One answer points to Australia’s historical fear of invasion (McMaster, 2002). Another suggests that Australians lack understanding of the kind that typically flows from having similar experiences (Jupp, 2002). Still, Prime Minister John Howard’s (2000) claim, that ‘we’ should be the ones to ‘decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come’, does more than merely resonate with a people who have never really been keen on immigration and who have lived fairly sheltered lives by international standards. What we have here is a commitment to aggressive territorial control.
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