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EXTRACT FROM *WHITE NATION: FANTASIES OF WHITE SUPREMACY IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY*¹

■ **Ghassan Hage**

Both MairiAnne Mackenzie and Alastair Davidson (this issue) comment on the relationship between immigration and multiculturalism. The following extract is reprinted with permission from the last seven pages for Ghassan Hage's new book, White Nation. It draws the two phenomena together and argues that public concern about immigration stems from the distress that 'White Australians' feel in the face of their declining power in multicultural Australia. The term 'White' stands for people of European origin while the term 'Third World-looking' people denotes most of the rest.

RITUALS OF WHITE EMPOWERMENT: THE RISE OF THE 'IMMIGRATION DEBATE'

If White Australians love debating immigration and multiculturalism, as indeed they do, it is because — particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, and until the chance election of Pauline Hanson resuscitated the belief in the power of voting — those debates became a far more suitable alternative to parliamentary elections as a

ritual which provided ordinary White people with an institutionalised form capable of reproducing their 'governmental belonging': a sense of control over their destiny and their nation. Throughout that period, the capacity of elections to do this diminished, as it became increasingly apparent that the political elite's overriding concern in politics was the desire for self-perpetuation. As electorates became more cynical,

the election process became increasingly unable to provide them with the feeling that it is through voting that they can decide the kind of nation in which they want to live.

Immigration debates, on the other hand, still provided this kind of 'White governmental buzz'. This was not because immigration debates and polls actually decided anything. Indeed, it is one of the peculiarities of immigration policy in Australia that no other federal policy has been polled and debated more than it has, while, at the same time, no other policy has evolved more blatantly in disregard of public opinion. This is why the explanation for the White media and the White government's clear commitment to a quasi-institutionalisation of immigration debates lies elsewhere. I want to suggest that rather than being perceived as a meaningful tool for the formulation of policy, the immigration polls and debates should be seen, in a more anthropological spirit, as *rituals of White empowerment*—seasonal festivals where White Australians renew the belief in their possession of the power to talk and make decisions about Third World-looking Australians.

A quick look at the questions asked in the immigration polls gives us a clear indication of the kind of power White Australians are invited to think they have. Positioned in the role of masters of the earth's population movements, they are enabled to give opinions on whether the number of migrants that arrived the year before was to their liking or not, and even to venture an opinion about what would be just right for them. Things about which even the most accomplished researchers find it hard to have a definite view—such as the effect of migration on the 'environment', or 'unemployment' or the 'national economy'—are suddenly

transformed into objects of 'legitimate' popular debate about which people, regardless of their qualifications, can have definite views. Immigration debates and polls are the democratisation of the national manager's position so that 'everyone' (i.e. every White Australian) can become a 'cook' in control of the mix (see chapter 4) and 'have a go' at saying 'what they like'.

By their very nature, immigration debates and opinion polls are an invitation to judge those who have already immigrated, as well as those who are about to immigrate. Not only is this facilitated through the use of the word 'migrant', whose meaning slides freely between the two categories, but also, and inescapably, to pronounce a judgment on the value of future migration is to pronounce a judgment on the value of the contribution of existing Third World-looking Australians to the country's development. It is in the conditions created by all these discursive effects that a White immigration speak flourishes—a language operating in itself as a technology of problematisation and marginalisation: 'they should come' and 'they shouldn't', 'they have contributed' and 'they haven't', 'there are too many' and 'there aren't enough', 'they are' and 'they aren't', 'they will' and 'they won't'. It is on such fertile ground that the White nation fantasy seasonally rejuvenated itself and tried to keep the multicultural Real at bay. In this sense, the immigration debate became the main form in which the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion was ritualised and institutionalised in Australia.

It is the size and political power of the migrant population which has been the central variable which brought about change in Australia's settlement policy in the transition from assimilation to multi-

culturalism. Each stage of settlement policy had to open up a larger inclusionary space to accommodate a more numerous and a more political migrant population demanding more citizenship rights, more national recognition, more decision-making power and more political participation—that is, more integration. It has also, however, been in the very nature of the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion that, while forced to open up these new *inclusionary* spaces for the settling migrants, White politics has tried at the same time to deploy different *exclusionary* processes to contain them within those spaces. As we have seen, the ambivalence inherent in the White multiculturalism of tolerance and acceptance reflected the way this dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, and its mode of positioning the migrant in the liminal space of the ‘not too excluded, but nor too included either’, was institutionalised by White multiculturalism .

The dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, however, can only be efficient in the short term. It cannot affect the long-term tendency of the political power and integration of the migrant population to go on increasing. This is why this dialectic has constantly to find new forms of operating. Consequently, if the spaces opened up for migrant participation by early multicultural policy correspond to a certain strength exhibited by the politicised migrants who fought for it in the 1970s, it should be hardly surprising to see multiculturalism entering a period of crisis in the 1980s, ten years after its inauguration. To expect a continuously stable state multiculturalism would be to expect unreasonably that, during that entire period, the number and the political power of the migrant population have somehow remained the same. This has hardly been the case.

From the early 1980s onwards, the electoral power of the ‘migrant vote’ has become a more pronounced factor in the calculations of all the political parties. Increasingly, non-White Australians are demanding more political participation in the mainstream political process still largely controlled by White and mainly Anglo and Celtic White Australians. This demand for more participation is partly the result of the emergence of a younger generation more socially at ease in the power struggles of Australian intra- and inter-party politics, and unsatisfied with the marginal role of ‘fund distributors’ that the older generation of ‘ethnic leaders’ had used as the basis of their status and their social mobility.

It is all of these tendencies that have put pressure on the capacity of White multiculturalism to regulate the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion of non-White Australians in the way it had done in its early history. It is in this context that the intensification of immigration polls and immigration debates in the 1980s has to be understood. The latter gradually became by far the most sacred of all the technologies of problematisation aimed at repositioning the White Australian in the role of the worried national manager and in relegating the ‘migrant’ to the role of national object.

The very frequency of these debates in the early 1990s was, however, an indication of what little effect they had on stopping the changes through which Australia was going. In fact, the 1990s has seen a marked increase in the capacity of Third World-looking Australians to advance their interests, even in the confines of White multiculturalism. These feelings were clearly exacerbated by the intensification of the processes of economic globalisation and international migration,

leading to the 'White decline' backlash against Paul Keating's blend of internationalist economic rationalism and his cosmo-multiculturalism.

The election of John Howard's conservative government and, particularly, the election of Pauline Hanson have marked, as I have pointed out, the rediscovery by the disaffected White population of the power of voting and, more importantly, the taste of political power, as opposed to endlessly and fruitlessly raving on talkback radio. Hanson's election created an opening for the eternal self-serving White whingeing and worrying that marked immigration debates to be articulated once again with a new voting practice which takes the latter seriously as a mode of influencing governmental decision making. If nothing else, Hanson has succeeded in transforming White worrying, with all its denials of the Real and its flights from fantasy into the phantasmagoric, into an efficient political force which crystallised in the formation of the One Nation Party.

CONCLUSION

For anyone following the White media's fascination with Pauline Hanson, it does not take long to realise that this fascination is well beyond the ordinary. The amount of exposure Hanson personally received after her elections was well beyond any attention given to a newly emerging politician. Her political views were presented and represented at every possible opportunity—more so than any other member of parliament espousing similar views. The rise of the One Nation Party received more attention than the rise of the Democrats and the Greens ever received. What is the secret of this obsession?

I'd like to suggest that there is a good dose of infantile narcissistic fascination

here. The White media is seduced by an infantile projection of itself. There is more than one psychoanalytic interpretation among many in this hypothesis. To develop my point, however, I'd like to begin by relating an incident from my youth in Beirut that has been lately resurfacing in my consciousness.

I was born in a middle-class, Maronite Catholic and culturally conservative environment. I often heard around me racist and derogatory remarks directed against Muslims. Like many families in Beirut, however, my parents and their friends had to deal, by necessity, with Muslim people.

I remember one day a Muslim merchant visiting a neighbour's house on some business. I and the neighbour's son were six or seven years old at the time, and we had already learned enough derogatory remarks about Muslims to last us a lifetime. Unfortunately, we had not learnt the art of recognising the appropriate time and place where such remarks can be made. When the guest picked up my friend and started teasing him in a common adult-child mode of play, my friend instinctively unleashed a number of venomous anti-Muslim remarks, telling him exactly what he has been taught to think of people like him. Needless to say, his remarks caused severe embarrassment in the *salon*. I particularly remember how we were unceremoniously dispatched from the lounge room, with his father sternly telling him, 'Shame on you'.

But this is not the end of the story, for I also distinctly remember what happened after the guest had left. I remember how everyone was laughing and saying how cute my friend has been and 'Ho ho ho! Did you see how the guy's face went red' and 'Good on you, Georges, you show them'.

When I look back at this event, I

realise that my friend's unchecked and 'immature' abuse performed the 'Christian tribe' a function. Not having carried out the abuse themselves, the respectable Christian families continued to benefit from the relationship of proximity and 'business as usual' they maintained with the various Muslims with which they had dealings. Nevertheless, they also benefited from the many incidents of open abuse to which the Muslims were constantly subjected, for 'business as usual' also meant keeping the Muslim as the inferior partner—the marginalised and the not-too-comfortable party in this relationship of proximity. This was important for ensuring the Christian's position of dominance within this relation before the civil war—a position they have now lost.

I want to suggest that the respectable side of White Australia today relates to Hanson in the same way my friend's family related to his 'unchecked extremism'. Whether they are in the media, in politics, in academia or in any other workplace (they can be spotted as soon as they talk about having no problem with multiculturalism as long as migrants put the interest of Australia first), behind every White multiculturalist affecting a position of respectability—and a willingness to condemn 'Hansonite extremism' in the nation's lounge room—there is another White gleefully grinning and saying, 'Good on you, Pauline. You show them' or another saying, 'She's so naughty' as if saying it to one's own child after he or she has misbehaved.

This is not a mere sentimental issue. It is a self-interested politics of domination. In much the same way as the story above, those respectable White Australians have an interest in someone else perceived as 'irrational and/or immature' doing the exclusion for them. They benefit from

both this marginalisation and from the relationship of proximity and dominance with the already marginalised that they are able to maintain thanks to, but also by distinguishing themselves from, the 'extremists'.

For White multiculturalists today, White neo-fascism represents the latest technology of containment and problematisation of Third World-looking migrants. Pauline Hanson has enabled White Australians to unleash a new phase in the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, aiming to transform the increasingly demanding and 'arrogant' migrants into decent 'debatable problematised objects', safely positioned in the liminal spaces of inclusion/exclusion. The relation between the dominant White multiculturalism and White national exclusionism, which has always been a relation of affinity based on a shared fantasy structure, has evolved today into an active relationship of *complicity*. This is the fundamental basis for what has clearly become the more general Hansonisation of White culture.

In the face of this destructive White tendency, some questions need to be asked: Are Whites still good for Australia? Have they been living in ghettos for too long? Are they dividing Australia? Do we need to have an assimilation program to help ease them into the multicultural mainstream? Clearly, it's time for Third World-looking Australians to do the 'worrying about the nation' number. And let's face it, there's plenty to worry about.

¹ G. Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, Pluto Press, Sydney (and Comerford and Miller, Kent, UK), 1998, ISBN 1 86403 056 9