In this article I will try to show why we must develop a critical understanding of this society and some of the ideas and theories that guide it if we are to confront racism. In doing this, I am concerned to locate theories socially and historically. Theories are not immanent truths plucked from the air, but are constructed by relatively powerful people with particular predispositions and interests. They form part of the structure of political formations, and the dominance of certain theories and certain philosophical orientations requires political explanation.

I will, therefore, begin by summarising some of the ways in which sociologists have theorised racism so as to clarify the more specific discussion that follows.

The first of these theories I have labelled biological determinism. This one is very common, reappearing in various guises, as we shall see later. Biological determinists argue that there are discrete races, clearly distinguished from each other by physical characteristics. These inherent characteristics determine temperament, intelligence and aptitudes, in some genetically transmitted way which then limits or advantages certain groups vis-a-vis other groups with a different genetic inheritance. Hence, relations of domination and subordination have been attributed to natural inequalities — supposedly inferior intelligence, endemic laziness, a natural incapacity to cope with abstract thought, etc.

As hominids became increasingly formidable competitors and predators to their own and closely related species, there was a strong pressure for the formation of larger and more powerful groups. (This) necessarily meant organising against other competing groups, and therefore maintaining ethnic boundaries. (1978, p. 105).

In another influential formulation, that of E.O. Wilson of Harvard, nationalism and racism are portrayed as the culturally nurtured outgrowths of simple tribalism, i.e. the genetic need to look after one's own (Wilson, 1976).

There are, of course, major flaws in this mode of analysis. One is that there are no discrete biological groups that can be designated as races. In the case of the US, for example, the mix of blacks and whites makes theories of biological determinism highly dubious to say the least. Criteria for difference are equally dubious. And a mountain of evidence indicates that the tests used by people like Jensen are of questionable validity (Richardson and Spears, 1973). In the case of the sociobiologists, one can criticise the selectivity of evidence, the interpretation derived from the available evidence and its extrapolation to human behaviour.

Their arguments have been elaborated by Pierre van den Berghe, a once liberal sociologist who has been an influential writer on race relations. van den Berghe has recently argued that racism also has a genetic basis. To quote:

Given the obvious deficiencies of such theories, how can we explain their widespread acceptance? Clearly, they fulfil some social and political purposes, and it is these purposes that we need to explore further.
Perspectives

The second mode of explanation of racism is closely related to the first. I have labelled this prejudice and human nature. In general terms, this approach sees all people as antagonistic towards those who are different from themselves. It is, therefore, "natural" to prefer one's own people, and prejudice maintains the cosiness of the in-group (the idea that We are superior to Them). Anthropologists will attest to the fact that such sentiments are widespread, that people distinguish themselves positively and their neighbours negatively in the same breath. Max Weber spoke of "ethnic honour", "the conviction of the excellence of one's own customs". If one's own ethos is superior, all others are, by definition, inferior. This kind of ethnocentrism is the other side of prejudice, as anyone who has observed the buildup of nationalism anywhere will verify. The line between ethnic honour and intolerance is a very fine line indeed. I want to return to this point later, as well. For the time being, we can see that prejudice by itself is an insufficient explanation. It tends to focus on individual interaction and fails to explain why prejudice occurs unevenly. To do that, we need a historically specific analysis. There is little evidence that prejudice causes conflict; it is more likely to be the outcome of conflict.

Nevertheless, attitudes and ideology are important determinants of group interaction. They cannot be dismissed as superstructures that simply reflect material realities. This has been the tendency in some theories which I shall label economistic for purposes of discussion. Economistic approaches are brilliantly discussed in a paper by Stuart Hall, who draws out the strands of argument presented by writers with quite different political orientations, e.g. development theorists such as Rostow, and marxists such as Gunther Frank. In a summary statement, Hall says:

Here one is then obliged to agree that race relations are directly linked with economic processes: historically, with the epochs of conquest, colonisation and mercantile domination, and, currently, with the "unequal exchanges" which characterise the economic relations between developed metropolitical and "underdeveloped" satellite economic regions of the world economy. The problem here is not whether economic structures are relevant to racial divisions but how the two are theoretically connected. (1980, p. 308)

This brings us to another kind of approach, one that often includes criticism of the "economic reductionism" of the previous tendency. This approach could be more accurately described as sociological, though there is also a wide range within such a category. For example, John Rex has developed an extremely complex analysis of the concrete economic and historical conditions under which racism developed in South Africa. These conditions included distinctions at the level of culture and values, which generated conflict between groups that was distinct from control of the means of production (see Rex, 1970). Rex's work is an impressive example of such analysis, and demonstrates the
Enoch Powell's intervention in Britain in 1968 gave a great boost to the racists. Powell adopted a role not unlike that of Professor Blainey in Australia today.

Inadequacies of economism. But an approach that resists or ignores economic explanations can become simply descriptive or even an apology for the status quo. The South African government, for example, never mentions the colour-coded control of economic resources whenever they offer cultural explanations for their vicious political system.

A sociological model that has obvious relevance to Australia is the assimilation model. Developed in the US, like so many of our adopted ideas, this model included a "race relations cycle" that moved from competition, to conflict, to accommodation and, finally, assimilation. Robert Park and the sociologists from the University of Chicago elaborated this view of immigrants and, to a lesser extent, of blacks in the US. It fits well with the broader philosophy of mobility according to individual effort within a classless society of self-made men. Accordingly, it has also been influential in Australia, another nation of immigrants. It was, however, irrevocably shaken by the Black Power movement and militant black activity. More recent critiques have also demonstrated that some immigrant groups have been more equal than others, even in the long term (Karabel, 1979; Kolko, 1976; Steinberg, 1981). The perpetuation and regeneration of racism are not explicable within this framework.

Another large body of material has focused on colonialism and the development of racist theories to justify the pillage, rape, murder and desecration that accompanied the colonial enterprise and the establishment of a world economy based on colonial and post colonial exploitation. Marie de Lepervanche has detailed these justifications, in the Australian case, for the disinheritance and genocide of Aborigines, the blackbirding of Pacific Islanders, the hostility to Asians (de Lepervanche, 1980). From the Bible to biology, reasons can be found for the superiority of the so-called "white" races and the natural inequality of the others.

John Rex argues that the colonial heritage is still important in Britain today, where most of the immigrants come from countries that used to be colonies. Their relations with the British are, to some extent, pre-formed (and deformed) by the experience of colonialism. Their presence in Britain testifies to the decline of Empire (Rex, 1970). This historical residue is picked up with some force in the title and contents of a recent study of racism in Britain, The Empire Strikes Back (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1983).

The analysis of colonialism has been extended by some writers to a notion of "internal colonialism", to explain continuing racial exploitation in, for example, South Africa (see Wolfe, 1975) and Australia (see Hartwig, 1978).

Certainly, the heritage of colonialism is central to an understanding of racism, as we will see when we discuss the British situation. But colonialism is also systematically neglected in colonising countries and in those ex-colonies, like Australia, where the colonial ideology goes largely unquestioned.

I will return to this question, but I'd like to indicate what I mean by a personal account, which I'm sure you'll find familiar. My daughter, attending a relatively progressive state primary school in a middle class area of Sydney, was assigned, in 1979, a large history project called "Man Discovers the New World". This Man, of course, was Magellan, Cortes, Columbus, Marco Polo and the pre-colonial boys from Europe. When I suggested (a) that this New World was pretty old and had already been discovered, (b) that the civilising intent attributed to these adventurers was dubious and (c) that those women and men who probably did discover these lands were not only brutally treated by the Europeans, but oppressed by their successors, my daughter burst into tears, her teacher became very hostile, and the headmaster gave me the "demented mother" treatment. Twenty years of anthropological training could make no scratch on the patina of 400 years of European domination.

I believe this is a very important element in the continued existence of racism. It means that our very basic social understandings, our ideas of ourselves in the world, are founded on racism. Martin Barker and others talk about the "new racism", but we should not over-emphasise the novelty of the ideas and actions they describe.
This too-brief summary of some approaches to racism may have shown up the inadequacy of most explanations. But some explanations have tremendous power. Stuart Hall, Professor of Sociology at the Open University in Britain, continues to produce brilliant analyses of racism providing models which can be used to structure sociological views of racism in certain ways. Hall emphasises that racism cannot be explained in abstraction from the other social relations. It is not a universal. Different racisms must be understood in the context of specific historical, economic and political conditions, existing class relations and ideological practices. I cannot pretend to tackle such a mammoth task here, but I will attempt to point out some of these elements in a consideration of contemporary racisms.

The “New Racism” in the 1980s

John Rex detected a resurgent racism in Britain towards the end of the 1950s when, as he put it, “racist jokes began to be heard in working men’s clubs” (1973, p. 176).

In 1958, there were violent clashes between black and white residents of Nottingham and Notting Hill. The “hooligans” held to be responsible were punished, but the activities in the Notting Hill area of such well-known racists as Sir Oswald Mosley were not widely publicised, let alone restrained.

By the mid 1960s, Conservative and Labour had agreed on the control of black immigration, thus giving support to the anti-immigrant and anti-black sentiment in the country. In 1968, the famous intervention of Enoch Powell gave a great boost to the racists. Drawing on his colonial experience as a Professor of Classics, Powell described himself as feeling like the Roman who saw visions of the River Tiber “foaming with much blood”. This apocalyptic vision would be realised in Britain unless black immigration was drastically reduced. Powell made three public speeches in 1968 which reiterated the same themes — that ordinary (white) English people were being overwhelmed, intimidated and dispossessed by the deluge of (black) immigrants. At the same time, Powell has refused to be described as racist. According to him, he is not arguing that blacks are inferior, just that they are different and that this difference would cause fear and reaction among the white population (see Barker, 1983, p. 40).

In these speeches, Powell raised several themes which have been extremely important and which have relevance to us here in Australia. One of these themes is “the genuine fear of ordinary people”. Barker describes it as “a central weapon in the Tory armoury” (p. 15). Margaret Thatcher herself used it in a major speech in January, 1978, which suggested that the “British character”, which “has done so much for democracy and law throughout the world” would react to the fear of being swamped (ibid.). Such fear, therefore, is a fear of loss of a way of life, of a valued and valuable culture.

Subsequent Tory statements demonstrate that this British way of life is seen as essentially homogeneous, cementing the unity of the nation. A challenge to that unity is therefore a threat. To quote Enoch Powell:

The disruption of the homogeneous we, which forms the essential basis of our parliamentary democracy and, therefore, of our liberties, is now approaching the point at which the political mechanisms of a “divided community” take charge and begin to operate autonomously (from Barker, 1983, p. 21).

Furthermore, the feeling of community is portrayed as human nature, that same human nature which rejects alien-ness. Powell again:

An instinct to preserve an identity and defend a territory is one of the deepest and strongest implanted in mankind, / happen to believe that the instinct is good, and that its beneficial effects are not exhausted. (BBC I, 9 June, 1969, quoted in Barker, 1983, p. 22).

Martin Barker analyses the development of this new Tory theory which links race with nation and which is legitimised by reference to human nature and common sense. Closely linked to the increasing jingoism of the Thatcher government, this new racism has been alarmingly successful.

At this point, we can see several elements of the theories/ideologies I summarised earlier. First, the appeal to human nature as an explanation of the naturalness of racism. Second, the
operated with Thatcher's strategies. The values and ideals of these Asian bureaucrats and businessmen correspond closely to the Conservative ideals. Thus, the rights of workers to reasonable conditions are subsumed under "family responsibilities" or "a cultural predilection for hard work". The rights of women are subsumed under "the culturally appropriate role of a subservient wife and mother" (Jakubowicz, 1984). Accordingly, the Thatcherites can be seen to have support from the immigrant population by this strategy of "selective ethnic revitalisation" (ibid.).

There are several strands emerging from this discussion which I would like to weave into our consideration of the revival of racism in Australia. These are by no means separate strands, but they do require special attention. One of these has to do with the historical, political and economic context of the new racism. It is part of an ideological package developed by the Right in opposition to what they generally describe as "socialism". (For example, Mr. Hodgman always refers to the current Australian government as "the Hawke socialist government". It always makes me think that there must be another government I don’t know about, but the adjective is important, even if inaccurate.) In fact, the aims of socialism have been largely abandoned by social democratic parties concerned with the "benevolent management of capitalism" (Poole, 1983, p. 105). The post-war consensus between capital, the state and organised labour ensured that the latter gave up "more radical aims of socialisation and redistribution in return for a share in longterm capitalist growth" (ibid.). In most advanced capitalist countries, this consensus included increased state intervention in welfare, economic guidance and some measures of redistribution. These policies were given theoretical support by major political parties and were accompanied by relative prosperity and considerable political stability. There were critics such as Ayn Rand and F.A. Hayek who warned about "creeping socialism", but McCarthyism and the cold war tended to absorb much of the anti-socialist rhetoric.

With increasing economic crisis, however, — unemployment, inflation and the end of the postwar boom — the fragility of the accord became apparent. Keynesian policies were based on continued growth, and the new economic problems were intransigent. It was at this point that the critiques of Milton Friedman began to attract attention, partly because they resonated with echoes of basic liberal thought. Friedman argued, among other things, that there must be a reduction in government expenditure and that governments must concentrate on controlling the money supply. These controls on government expenditure naturally attacked the position of workers, especially those at the bottom of the heap.

Ross Poole offers an excellent analysis of these developments in a paper called "Markets and Motherhood" (1983, pp. 103-120). He points out that the breakdown of the tripartite accord has sharpened class conflict. But: monetarist policies have been presented within a political discourse of much broader appeal, in which the notion of class conflict is subsumed under a more traditional liberal rhetoric. It is through this supplementation that monetarism has been translated into the remarkably effective political instrument of the past ten years" (1983, p. 108).

The main elements of this rhetoric are:
(a) individual freedom, including an emphasis on free enterprise and private property;
(b) the free market and the equilibrium model of market forces;
(c) that state, necessary to protect property, control money supply and maintain order;
(d) socialism, the contrast to these three elements and "the acme of oppression and inefficiency".

To quote Poole again:

"The force of this rhetoric does not reside in its empirical and theoretical adequacy but in the extent to which it corresponds to much that is contained by way of aspiration, resentment and "common sense" in everyday experience. It is important to recognise the nature and source of its appeal — even to those against whom it is ultimately directed. (1983, p. 109)."

These principles have combined with a rhetoric which Poole describes as "moral conservatism", including the reassertion of traditional sex roles and of patriarchal authority within the family, an accompanying critique of
Racism on two fronts:

In its more blatant form in the Northern Territory and on campus, where it is directed against Asian students.

sexual permissiveness, abortion, homosexuality and pornography. Other elements have been patriotism and a return to religion, usually of a fundamentalist kind. In Britain, as we have just seen, and in the US and Europe, racism is another element in this set of ideological practices.

The Australian Context

Some of these elements of struggle are already familiar to Australians, e.g. the work of the Razor Gang in cutting back state services and the rise of nationalism (perhaps at its most absurd when represented as the feverish support of the activities of millionaire yachtspeople). We have also seen right-wing opposition to anti-discrimination legislation — an opposition supported by the wealthy and powerful wives of wealthy and powerful men in the name of the "majority of women whose voices cannot be heard". Monetarism has also been with us for some time, as have the theories of Ayn Rand and Hayek, both favourites of Malcolm Fraser.

Racism, however, has only recently resurfaced in Australia at a semi-official level. Marie de Lepervanche (1980; 1984) and others (Curthoys and Markus, 1978; Lippmann, 1973; McQueen, 1970) have demonstrated the official uses to which racism has been put since the Europeans invaded this country, but it had receded considerably from public statements and ideology.

Nevertheless, racism has never been honestly confronted in Australia at an official level in the way in which sexism, for example, is beginning to be confronted. This is a country whose very foundations are racist, but where racism and the heritage of colonialism are curiously unexamined. The "anti-dago" riots in Kalgoorlie in the early '30s are not well known, nor is the "blackbirding" of Pacific Islanders to Queensland in the 19th Century. Colonialism and post-colonialism are extremely important and poorly understood in Australia, despite the continued existence of colonial attitudes and institutions.

Several consequences follow from this condition of selective amnesia. One is an identification with the colonisers, including, for example, an assumption of "natural"
superiority to Australian blacks and to other non-whites. The civilising effect of European settlement also goes largely unquestioned. Related to this is a collective paranoia that allows bogeys such as the Red Hordes and the Yellow Peril to be used, with effect, for purposes of political mobilisation. All of these elements have been well utilised by racist groups and others who would reject any association with such groups. For example, the Immigration Control Association letterboxed Sydney householders in the 1970s with pamphlets depicting red and yellow arrows rushing downwards from Asia to Australia. More recently, National Action seems to have taken the lead with spraypainting graffiti about the “Asian invasion”. The egregious Professor Blainey has also touched on several of these themes, talking about a “new Asian Australia policy” (The Age, 20 March, 1984) and warning that Asians will be the “inevitable possessors of this land” (The Australian, 4 March, 1984). We have moved, he claims, “from White Australia to Surrender Australia” (The Age, 3 April, 1984).

Professor Blainey has moved the debate off the lavatory walls (where it perhaps belongs) and onto the front pages of the newspapers. He has been congratulated by some for his “well reasoned contribution to an important debate” (The Australian editorial, 21 March 1984). Other have compared him with Enoch Powell, who also gave a high level legitimisation to racist claims. Certainly, the Victorian president of the RSL, the Big Brother Movement, and the otherwise marginalised racist associations have been grateful for the media coverage and for the influential support from an unexpected quarter. Blainey has articulated, at great length, the themes of nationalism, invasion and Britishness, explaining his intervention in terms of concern for the poor and the unemployed, who are, he presumes, suffering because of the government’s purportedly pro-Asian and anti-British immigration policy. Like Margot Anthony and Flo Bjelke-Petersen, he speaks as a privileged person representing the downtrodden masses. In that respect, his technique is certainly reminiscent of Enoch Powell who always brought into his speeches the ordinary Englishman and little old ladies with genuine fears of the blacks (Barker, 1983, pp. 37-42).

Although claiming that he “might have thought twice” about making his original comments if he had known what the reaction would be (The Age, 20 March 1984), Blainey has continued to stir this rather noisome mess of pottage, seemingly intent on creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. At the same time, the Liberal Party, who initially criticised his comments (The Age, 3 April 1984), have subsequently embraced them with a kind of fervour, placing themselves in the rather contorted position of criticising a policy they instituted while in government, but presumably expecting to gain support by kicking a can which resonated so well for Blainey.

Obviously, some valid comparisons can be made between the Australian and the British situation I described earlier, especially if the conservative parties here pick up on the Blainey initiatives and, in effect, align themselves with the far right. The other programs for moral conservatism are well advanced, especially in Queensland where science teachers are now required to teach creationism. Mr. Fraser, presumably with the support of other conservatives, has been reportedly assembling his own think-tank (Sydney Morning Herald, 9 June 1984) to include such well known freedom fighters as Professor Leonie Kramer (an outspoken critic of Equal Employment Opportunity) and Hugh Morgan of Western Mining who has argued a kind of Christian mission for mining and associated the land rights movement with backwardness and cannibalism. Fraser himself has just re-emerged from the heartland of the new right, the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy in Washington.

The ideological package of the new right is not without its inconsistencies, and the interconnections between the practices I have been describing are extremely complex. It is, however, important to demonstrate that there are interconnections, that the resurgence of moral conservatism, of nationalism and of racism is no mere historical accident. Obviously, there is considerable support for these strategies, but we should also bear in mind their likely outcomes and those people at whom they are directed. They have persuasive power partly because of their appeals to “common sense”, to the “genuine fears of ordinary people” and to long-established folk ideologies generated by the kind of selective amnesia I mentioned earlier. But they are also persuasive because they are rooted in existing practices and relations.

To explain a little further — “common sense”, for example, is what people regard as natural. Some people call it “horse sense”. But most of our sense is, in fact, learned, and learned within a particular context that is, as I have shown, historically formed. Appeals to common sense are usually appeals to the status quo, and this often means appeals to prejudice. Common sense must be treated with acute scepticism.

Similarly, studies of nationalisms have revealed their status as “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983). If we had a better historical sense, we would be better equipped to ask “whose
nationalisms are these, and how have they been constructed?” What does it mean to me, for example, to identify with some overweight footballer who probably beats his wife? The various Australian nationalisms that have been constructed have been overwhelmingly male, Anglo, white and possessed mainly of physical attributes. Why have the rest of us been left out?

It is not hard to see that certain modes of domination are reproduced in these representations. These modes appear as the natural order of things, but they are, in fact, quite arbitrary. Yet they are extremely powerful, mobilising people to hostility against “aliens”, and sustaining divisions between people who actually share common interests. Furthermore, the “naturalness” of these modes of domination goes unquestioned partly because they are embedded in the state and in existing institutions.

On the immigration front, the official interpretation of multiculturalism has, it seems, deliberately avoided any analysis of class and power relations, of past, present or potential conflict or of the fundamental tensions between capital, labour and the state. In analyses that ignored economic issues, “inequality itself has been reinterpreted as the cultural monopolisation of social resources” (Martin, 1983, p. 147). As Andrew Jakubowicz points out, Fraser’s multicultural think-tank even imported Michael Novak, a legitimating from the American enterprise Institute, to reaffirm the importance of ethnicity to free market economies (Jakubowicz, 1984).

The current government, therefore, is faced with an immense task if, in Jakubowicz’s words, they wish:

to wrest back the space swamped by conservative rhetoric and political domination and re-establish free and open debate within which redistribution goals concerned with social justice become legitimate once more.

Geoffrey Blainey’s intervention has made this task even more difficult by suggesting that problems of the distribution of resources can be linked to a government bias towards Asian immigrants. The old tactic of scapegoating takes us further than ever from the central issues.

Certainly, the Minister for Immigration, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and the Prime Minister have recently spoken out against racism. But the assault on racism, as on sexism and other ideologies that legitimate domination, will require a coherent and sustained analysis and a genuine desire for change. Such an assault would have to confront the entrenched structures and ideas I have been discussing — that is, not just making people more tolerant, but redistributing resources and power.

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