The Attack on 'Political Correctness': Islamophobia and the Erosion of Multiculturalism in Australia Under the Howard Regime

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John Howard's culture war on political correctness and multiculturalism included direct and indirect encouragement for Islamohobia in Australia. This article explores the manner in which this war was waged against the 'Muslim Other'.

This article explores changes in Australian civil society from 1996 to 2007 through a case study of the rolling back of multiculturalism and the rise of Islamophobia over this period. John Howard's neo-conservative Liberal-National coalition came to office in 1996 with a concerted ideological attack on what it identified as 'political correctness', which was supposedly preventing 'us' from being relaxed and comfortable about who 'we' were, and was stifling the voice of ordinary 'battlers' in such matters as a debate about ('too much' or the 'wrong mix' of) immigration and multiculturalism, as well as about Indigenous land rights and reconciliation, gender relations, and a host of other issues allegedly dominated by unrepresentative, middle-class, metropolitan elites. At the end of his political career, days before the 2007 federal election, Howard was citing his purging of 'the overdose of political correctness' as one of the major and abiding achievements of his 11½ years in office:

> We no longer have perpetual seminars about our national identity. ... We no longer agonise as to whether we're Asian or European or part-Asian or part-European or too British or not British enough or too close to the Americans or whatever. ... We actually rejoice in what has always been the reality and that is that we are gloriously and distinctively Australian (*The Age* 22/11/2007).

'Political correctness' proved an effective rod with which to beat the proponents ('industry' or 'lobby' were the preferred epithets) of multiculturalism, which all but disappeared from the political landscape in Australia, as a set of principles and policies, submerged in the mainstream of a renewed assertion of 'integration'. What was the terrain on which this battle in the 'war of position', one of many in Australia's version of the 'culture wars', was waged?

All who deploy the concept of 'civil society' since its return to social-scientific currency in the 1980s and 1990s are inevitably influenced by Gramsci's seminal reworking of the concept in his notebook elaborations over the years when he was incarcerated by Mussolini's Fascist state. The concept of civil society was revived by intellectuals of central and eastern Europe seeking to theorise and to advance the struggle outside of and against the 'really-existing' Communist State (Kumar 1993). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, it gained considerable currency among 'Western' scholars and indeed entered into common-sense usage among journalists and political commentators (Buttigieg 1995, 2).

A generation earlier, from the late 60s and especially the 70s, Gramsci's parallel concept of 'hegemony' had become influential within 'Western Marxism', as the left confronted the 'fortifications' and 'earthworks' of bourgeois civil society, which would need to be occupied or rather replaced in any socialist transformation, capturing the State being unfeasible in the West and increasingly seen as problematic when looking towards the Eastern Bloc. The poststructuralist turn saw Gramscian approaches go out of fashion in western academic circles, at times even travestied in a 'post-Gramscian' version of 'post-Marxism' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The rise of the Polish Solidarity movement and the eventual disintegration of Soviet socialism gave impetus to the turn away from class-based theories and working-class politics and towards the 'new social movements' as the newfound agents of history – an intellectual trajectory that had begun in the 1960s with the proclamation of the 'end of ideology' (e.g. Bell 1961) and the heralding of the 'postindustrial society' (e.g. Touraine 1974; Bell 1973). The 'new social movements' would come to be seen as the paradigmatic social actors of civil society. The effect of these trends was to reassert the hegemony of liberalism in social sciences.

Gramsci's profound, and at times antinomous (Anderson 1976/77) re-elaboration of the concept of civil society, if closely studied, can both alert us to the liberal-bourgeois ideology in the conventional

uses of the term, and offer us a way beyond (though not without its contradictions). For Marx, civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) incorporated the relations of production; through famously standing Hegel on his head he arrived at the notion that it was these which determine the nature of the State, rather than the other way around. The processes of fundamental social change need to be sought in the relations of production, and not in 'the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out' (Marx 1968). The areas of social relations which were part of civil society, but were not themselves relations of production, were not of central interest for Marx. Yet it is interesting to note the more than linguistic double service which sees civil society as bourgeois society.

The term civil society [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*] emerged in the eighteenth century, when property relationships had already extricated themselves from the ancient and medieval communal society. Civil society as such only develops with the bourgeoisie; the social organisation evolving directly out of production and commerce, which in all ages forms the basis of the State and of the rest of the idealistic superstructure, has, however, always been designated by the same name (German Ideology, Part 1, Feuerbach, B: The Illusion of the Epoch).

For Marx, civil society is not counterposed to the State, it 'transcends' it and indeed organises it:

> Civil society embraces the whole material intercourse of individuals within a definite stage of the development of productive forces. It embraces the whole commercial and industrial life of a given stage and, insofar, transcends the State and the nation, though, on the other hand again, it must assert itself in its foreign relations as nationality, and inwardly must organise itself as State (German Ideology, Part 1, Feuerbach, B: The Illusion of the Epoch).

There is a section in The German Ideology which quite clearly prefigures concerns which Gramsci took up at the centre of his theory of hegemony:

> the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships

the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. ... Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch (German Ideology, Part 1, Feuerbach, B: The Illusion of the Epoch).

The qualifier 'generally speaking' and the unqualified 'nothing more than' are of course at issue, and it is true that this very issue exercised Gramsci considerably. Yet it is not correct to assert, as does Bobbio (1987) that Gramsci reversed the causality of the base-superstructure model in Marx, such that he presented the ideological, juridical and philosophical 'superstructure' as determining the economic base.

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Gramsci does not simply accept the State/civil society dichotomy of the eighteenth-century social philosophers, rather he profoundly problematises it. Granted, in his writings on 'The Intellectuals', he conceives civil society as one of two superstructural 'levels', the other being 'political society' or 'the State'. Here he defines civil society as 'the ensemble of organisms commonly called "private"' (Gramsci 1971, 12). Yet elsewhere (Gramsci 1971, 261) he writes of the State as 'night-watchman', 'Hegemony over its historical development belongs to private forces, to civil society –which is "State" too, indeed is the State itself'. Here civil society subsumes or (if you like) transcends the State, rather than being opposed or complementary to it. In various formulations, as Perry Anderson (1976/77) points out, Gramsci proposes configurations of civil society, State and hegemony which are in tension with each other. In the first of the three models which Anderson outlines:

> political society (or dictatorship, or coercive apparatus to ensure that the popular masses conform to the type of production an economy of a given moment)' was counterposed to 'civil society (or hegemony of a social group over the whole national society exercised through so-called private organizations, like the church, trade unions, schools and so on) (Anderson 1976/77, 22).

In this version, which Anderson identifies as the predominant one in Gramsci's writings, hegemony is equated with consent and civil society, and

these moments are opposed to the equivalence of domination, coercion and State. In the second version, hegemony is exercised both in the State, as 'political hegemony', and in civil society, as 'civil hegemony' (Anderson 1976/77, 25). In a third version, the State is redefined in an enlarged, 'integral' version (see also Buci-Glucksman 1981), 'The State (in its integral meaning') is dictatorship + hegemony' (Gramsci 1971, 239, cited in Anderson, 1976/77, 25). In this version, the concept of State is radically expanded to incorporate civil society: 'By the State should be understood not merely the governmental apparatuses, but also the "private" apparatuses of hegemony or civil society' (Gramsci 1971, 261, cited in Anderson 1976/77, 33). Here Anderson argues that this third version of the hegemony/State/civil society nexus which he identifies entails that 'In reality, civil society and State are one and the same' (Gramsci 1971, 160, cited in Anderson 1976/77, 33).

Joseph Buttigieg (1995, 10) explains the significance of 'Gramsci's concept of the state, which he takes to be integral, comprising both the juridical-administrative system and civil society.' Contrary to liberal interpretations which proceed as if the capitalist State as such did not exist, Gramsci 'rejects the liberal notion that the state consists solely in a legal and bureaucratic order, which remains indifferent to class interests while safeguarding the autonomous development of civil society'. The very 'rules of the game' of bourgeois democracy are not a 'level playing field', but assert the interests of the class which devised them (Buttigieg 1995, 7-10). The 'consent' of hegemony (as distinct from coercion) is not a matter of 'choice' as in liberal ideology, rather it is 'manufactured'; nor is it equally distributed in society. Even the knowledge of how consent is manufactured is not evenly distributed, such that many 'believe they give their own consent freely and spontaneously' (Buttigieg 1995, 7). Civil society, to reiterate, is not the 'level playing field' of liberal pluralism. In the modern, liberal-bourgeois State, the constitutive elements of civil society and political society are not separable as State and non-State, and 'hegemony in civil society and domination of political society go hand in hand' (Buttigieg 1995, 28).

Notwithstanding this relationship – that for Gramsci consent is always protected by the armour of coercion – the struggle of subaltern strata against the ruling classes must be waged in civil society, where 'a counterhegemonic conception of the social order' together with 'the formation of counterhegemonic institutions' has to be achieved: these 'actually require an expansion of civil society' (Buttigieg 1995, 31). For this reason, Gramsci viewed the corruption of

civil society in 1930s Italy as inimical to progressive struggle. Elements of this corruption included poor leadership in civil society by the political parties, lack of integrity in political and intellectual leaders, the pursuit by governments merely of 'immediate class interests' and their resort to dictatorial functioning, the paucity of cultural life and the impoverishment of high culture (Buttigieg 1995, 31). While cautioning against ahistorical appropriations of these concerns of Gramsci, Buttigieg (1995, 32) suggests that his 'unsettling questions' may usefully counteract 'the sort of political complacency that has taken place in [Western] civil society since 1989'.

It is in this sense, I believe, that we can most usefully talk about the 'erosion' of civil society in Australia over that period, and particularly over the last decade or so. We consider briefly here the case of the erosion of multiculturalism since 1996, and especially the rise of State-sponsored Islamophobia over that period.

Multiculturalism in Australia was a policy response of the early 1970s to the failure of the existing assimilation policy and the increasingly unacceptable inequality faced by immigrants of non-English-speaking background in most areas of Australian society, including education, work, politics and culture. Especially problematic was that these inequalities were being reproduced in the second generation of immigrants. The larger and more established, notably Italian and Greek, immigrant communities had begun to organise very effectively though cultural associations, advocating for recognition, access and equity. Australian multiculturalism, while designed and instituted by the State, was demanded by what would later be called 'New Social Movements', in coalition with progressive forces within the labour movement, and was won from the State in their struggle. It was not principally a means of social control (though it did also function as such, particularly under conservative governments). It involved considerable concession to demands raised within 'civil society', both for resources to redress material inequalities and for recognition of the rights of cultural minorities. While these measures were first introduced in the early 70s under the Whitlam Labor government, responding to what many would see as among its crucial constituencies, many in the social movements concerned may have been surprised to find their agenda taken up with such enthusiasm by the conservative Fraser government in the mid to late 1970s. Multicultural objectives were indeed bent

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towards conservatism and social control (through funding mechanisms) in this period, yet it is fair to say that the Fraser Coalition government in this respect transcended the narrow corporate interests of the ruling class which was its sponsor, and actually advanced the interests of a wider group of citizens – something bourgeois democracy invariably claims to do but actually achieves only in limited areas of social life for limited periods.

The Hawke and Keating governments continued the rhetoric of multiculturalism, but began to undermine its resourcing through their 'economic rationalism'. The social movements which had demanded multiculturalism were not well placed to defend it, having had their teeth pulled through a process of incorporation which began under the Fraser government, whereby ethnic community leaders were beholden and compromised to ensure continuation of necessary State resourcing. In the camera obscura of ideology, this could be made to appear as the government being beholden to ethnic communities: an ideology that Pauline Hanson's constituency would later use to great effect. With the attack on new social movements as 'politically correct' imported from right-wing commentators of the USA in the early 80s, multiculturalism was targeted in this broadside. In Gramsci's language, there was a kernel of true 'good sense' in the 'common sense' thus spread about an elite and unrepresentative multicultural 'industry'.

Of course, what was really being expressed were the insecurities of unskilled workers rendered unemployed or in danger of it when industries restructured with the very globalising processes that Keating was ushering in, and those petty-bourgeois under pressure from the same forces. Resenting the Keating-led moves to have Australia seen domestically and in the region as 'part of Asia', these class fractions, historically prone anyway to racist resolutions in ideology of real contradictions, could easily be led to project their discomforting fears onto the non-White, non-European, non-Christian 'Other'.

Liberal Leader John Howard, having failed in his adventure in anti-Asian racist populism in 1988 (when both multiculturalism and a non-discriminatory immigration policy had bipartisan party-political support), seized the opportunity to manipulate this xenophobia. From his attacks on 'political correctness' and the supposed censoring of genuine debate about immigration and multiculturalism in the 1996 election campaign, to the 2001 'Tampa crisis' and the 'Pacific solution', to his government's attacks criminalising Sudanese refugees during the 2007 election campaign, Howard harnessed this populism to his claim to

represent the working-class 'battler' and the petite-bourgeois 'aspirationals', while unfailingly advancing the interests of big capital. Narrow, naked corporate ruling-class interests prevailed, while nationalism, racism, despising of 'left' intellectuals, and the commodity-led trashing of culture helped obscure this reality for 11½ years.

In the 'othering' of 'Middle-Eastern' asylum seekers and the Muslim 'enemy within', which melded so seamlessly in the 2001 election campaign and for most of the time since, coercive measures by the State were certainly stepped up, from concentration camps in the desert or offshore in impoverished client island-states, to draconian 'anti-terror' laws, not to mention unlawful coercive interventions by the State in the Habib, Haneef, ul-Haque and other cases. Violent security service and federal police raids on places of worship, bookshops, and suburban family homes were publicised when the government wanted, and it became illegal and imprisonable to report details of them when it did not. The enemy was invariably the Muslim Other. Yet is there a clear line between this coercion by the State and the Islamophobia widely promoted in association with it in 'civil society': in tabloids, on talkback radio, on commercial television and its epigones in the worst of the ABC? The racist mob attack at Cronulla beach in 2005 would suggest not. There is no guarantee that civil society or social movements are necessarily progressive. We can certainly see the Gramcian 'hand in glove' relationship at work in these instances.

While there is clearly an aggrandisement of the coercive powers and organs of the State, I doubt that it makes sense in this case to see civil society as 'eroded' in the sense of shrinking or withering away. Yet we can certainly see a corruption or degrading of civil society here.

There is nothing especially revolutionary about multiculturalism. Yet both as a set of policies within the state, and as an intellectual and moral philosophy, it makes a space within capitalist society for certain progressive politics and culture. This space, along with other gains of liberalism in capitalist society, should be defended and wherever possible extended by progressive social forces, without any illusions about the State or romanticisation of social movements. The alternative might not be the one Gramsci and his comrades faced, but it might be just as brutally inhuman.

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Eavesdropping

Holy makro!
Okay here's what I like to do...
Count the carriages
1..2..3..4...16..17
I lost count, did you?

Alex press the light button
Press the light button
It's easy, hey look at mine
The doors are closing
We're moving, ohmigod!

I've seen this train a million times
But I've never been on it
'Cos my uncle goes to Brisbane
We might even find
His electric guitar!

You know that's sweet
Batman, no um, the Superman one
That's where we went
To the thingo farm...
This is a cucumber farm

My friend joel really
Owned a really, really big piece of land
Like a farm
And he owns a cow and a dog
The cow must turn in to a bull

Because we hurt it
By scaring it and it fell down
And we're like
'we have to help it'
And all the other cows were like
watching us

Melanie Busato
Elliot Heads, Qld.