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“Not good enough for Australian citizenship” – How Australians imagined Europeans in the 1920s

The historical connections between Europe and Australia are profound. Europe has nurtured Western civilisation. Australia has inherited, embraced and adapted that great civilisational tradition. [...] The contribution of Europeans to Australia has been so strong that it almost seems redundant to mention it.

Kevin Rudd (2008)

There is a tendency within scholarship to narrate Australia's (recent) past as a one-directional flow of ideas, people and goods, a process in which Europe of course is the point of departure and Australia the target. Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd reflected on this process in his speech at the *European Policy Centre* in Brussels in April 2008. In this view, Australia was, and is still, a passive screen for European projections.

Recently, this Euro-centric approach has been subject to intense academic debate. The necessity of reconsidering and revising previous historical accounts of Australia's past - in particular the way in which European expansion and perspectives of the colonized are narrated - has gained momentum in debates such as the *History Wars*. The focus of academic attention has turned towards a history of interaction with the outside, in which each society influenced and significantly participated in forming the cultural identities of the other. This article considers these interactions, and posits that Australians have played an integral part in the processes of representing and defining what constitutes 'European' and have thus shaped European history in return.

Although there have been numerous studies in European identity, the construction of the 'European' – the 'imagined community' inhabiting Europe – has remained largely-unexamined. As notions of the European can be traced as far back as Antiquity, this is a

surprising omission. Herodotus was among the first to describe Europeans in demarcation to Persians, drawing on cultural arguments (Schmale 2001:165). Beginning in the 19th century, the image of the European has evolved as a significant category of demarcation and belonging, while today, it is implicitly used without scrutinising its implicit meanings (Bluche/ Patel/ Lipphardt 2009:11).

Despite the concept finding growing application, European historians have traditionally focused on writing a social history of ideas of Europe, in which the European person as the one inhabiting the geographical space has been reserved only a marginal role. With changes in political geography after 1989, after the collapse of 'real socialism' in Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War, followed by an increased integration of the economies of the European Union, interest has shifted toward the issue of identities. In the social and political sciences, research focused on the complex interplay of self-images and images of the *Other* in negotiating one's own understanding of the self. However, most of these studies have centred on questions of political identity with regard to the European Union and are limited to venues of construction within Europe. Historians such as Bo Strath, Michael Mann and Luisa Passerini however, have stressed that non-European societies have played an essential part in shaping self-images of Europe. In the past decade, a number of studies offering non-western perspectives - from China, Africa or the Asian Pacific region - on Europe were published. Within this context, Australia has gradually become recognized as an interesting case study.

It is enriching to study representations of the European from an Australian perspective. However, in regard to its international involvement, Australia's neglect in world historiography in general, and European history in particular, seems striking. Australia has always been an interesting case study: by virtue of her largely European cultural heritage since 'white' settlement, but with regard to her Indigenous peoples and geographical position, the question of Australia's belonging to either 'the West' or Asia is an exceptional one. It is assumed that this open status of belonging is reflected in

multiple, diverging representations of the European, serving as one category of demarcation in defining one's own identity as Australian.

It is the aim of this article to identify dominant representations of the European in the Australian press and to stress their function in identity-building processes. Before turning to the empirical findings, I will provide an introductory overview on the study of representations as forms of organising knowledge. I will reflect on the substantial role of the press as a powerful source of these constructs. In the second part, the focus will be on the press debate about the 'white' settlement of the Australian Tropics in the 1920s to present many of the central issues in a concise form.

Locating representations of a moving target

Mental images serve as a structuring device for the organization of our daily lives. They reduce the complexities of the social and political data that we encounter in our social surrounding and shape our understanding of who we are and who the *Others* are and how we relate to one another. In short, they are a form of organised knowledge which is communicated in interaction. They are formed by individual and collective experiences and are mediated through traditions and culture as well as politics. As a result of their consolidation, such notions assume the status of social directives. Neither eternally fixed nor of lasting validity, representations are continuously subject to adaptation, change, re-invention, even replacement. The negotiation processes take place at a variety of societal levels the media, in science, politics and education.

Consider the following. In March 1920, the Australian weekly newspaper *The Bulletin* featured a reader's response by journalist Randolph Bedford. The heated argument between the anonymous authors 'Biologist' and 'Mere European' as well as Bedford about immigration restrictions and desired newcomers had evolved over several weeks. Once again, its author argued for a closer physical and mental examination of incoming foreigners:

We are soon to close our doors against inferior goods, I hope, and to maintain our standard we must close our doors also against cheap humans, while combining the white races for the best they have. (...) 'There are hundreds of thousands of English and Europeans who are not good enough for Australian citizenship, and I asked for rigorous examination and discrimination of these.'

Disregarding Bedford's racial bias, this view illustrates the complex processes of negotiating one's own identity through contrastive representations of the *Other*. It provides a graphic example for Australia's discourse of belonging. Here, Australians as a social and political community share unifying qualities. They are characterised as hard-working, healthy and intelligent. In comparison to non-whites ("cheap humans") and immigrants sharing the same racial background but opposed to Australian aspirations, Bedford argues that on the basis of their inherent characteristics Australians can be regarded as a superior race.

The article reflects Bedford's support for the *White Australia Policy*. The policy created a sense of unity against a racially defined external aggressor (Tavan 2005:14). In the above-mentioned example, Bedford differentiates between English and Europeans, indicating multi-layered and ambiguous relations toward a variety of *Others*. Indeed, this distinction implies a hierarchical social order privileging whiteness as a collectively shared concept that distinguishes Australians, Europeans and English from 'them'. Thereafter, it can be argued that 'European' is not predominantly used as a category to define geographical affiliation, but as a term for cultural identification. It serves as a notion of social belonging and a means of grouping. Lastly Bedford even performs an act of creativity for the purpose of demarcation. Considering that Australian citizenship was only created by the 1948 *Australian Citizenship Act*, the notion of an Australian citizenship as a category of social identity is strikingly new. His comment marks the evolving divide between imperial sentiments and national aspirations. Prior to this Act, all Australian residents were British subjects – with the exception of the Indigenous population.

Representations both direct and reflect meanings of 'who we are' and 'who we are not' and even further, 'who we oppose'. The

development of representations is dependent on communication. They are the subjects of public discourse and as a consequence of these discussions, there are always multiple, competing images. In the case of Australia, it is hypothesized that representations of the European are formed in a triangle of definition and demarcation to the indigenous population within, the inhabitants of the surrounding Pacific region, and the Australians themselves. Lastly, representations and social order are correlated. In studying their development and change in time, it is possible to examine how traditional representations are overcome and with them the social orders that have stabilised them (Baberowski/ Kaelble/ Schriewer 2008:12).

'National identity' and 'national stereotyping' are inevitably part in the process of constructing images of the European person. Here is an example to illustrate my point: In September 1923 *The Bulletin* featured the full main-page cartoon *The European Menagerie*. On top of a vantage point stands a little boy representing Australia (as revealed by the lettering on his hat.) He observes the scene below with some curiosity: an ensemble of animals and birds, each a stereotypical symbol for a European nation, deliver each other fierce blows. The French tiger snaps at the tail of the German eagle, calmly observed by the British lion. While the Spanish bull is already wounded, the Italian frog is ready to jump at the Greek fly. 'Well, I guess, I got the best possie, after all' comments the Australian lad.

The cartoon illustrates that the war has shattered Australia's admiration for Europe. Now, Australia is taking the position of a detached observer of European power tussles. The fighting parties are separated safely from the outsider below in a menagerie. Interpreting the caricature, one could point out the following: Australia's self-image reflects both immaturity and a feeling of inferiority as evident in being depicted as a child. Nevertheless, in regard to the *Others*, it is the only human player in the game, which adds ideas of reason, common sense and morality compared to the pugnacity of the animal crowd. Interestingly, neither are all of the pictured players nations, for instance the Balkans, nor are all of the chosen animal icons commonly used as national stereotypes. Lastly,

all of the depicted play a significant part in the struggle for power on the European landmass. Nations like Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal or Switzerland are not represented.

As displayed, notions of the European are not simply a multiplication and repetition of national identities of individual societies on a higher level. 'European' is neither used as a synonym nor a substitute for a single specific nationality or a fixed sample of national identities. Rather, it is a fluid term with shifting meanings around a core of shared values and ideas, always depending on the context and the time in which it has been used. To put it in more general terms, the exact function and meaning of these images can only be studied in a certain context and time frame. Then it is possible to determine the kind and degree of otherness applied in defining oneself.

Hence, I will examine the press debate about the settlement of Tropical Australia. By way of detailing the rhetorical deployment and meaning of representations of the European within this context, I will discuss how and for what purposes social boundaries between different groups have been drawn in that particular context. Towards that end, material has been collected from two weekly magazines, *The Bulletin* and *Smith's Weekly*, both published throughout the 1920s.

The (European) White Man in the Australian Tropics

From the second half of the 19th century, ideas about racial exclusiveness had quickly gained a foothold in Australia. The implementation of the *White Australia Policy* attracted overwhelming support throughout the country. However, the legal exclusion of non-Europeans was insufficient. Without scientific argument for racial exclusion and practical proof that the tropical areas could be settled the government would be unable to maintain the *White Australia Policy* in the face of international pressures.

The Bulletin

Registered at the General Post Office, Sydney, N.S.W. Australia, for Transmission by Post as a Newspaper.

Vol. 44.—No. 2276.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 1923.

Price 6s.



THE EUROPEAN MENAGERIE.

THE LITTLE CHAP: "Well, I guess I got the best possie, after all."

From the beginning, Australian immigration restrictions were subject to British criticism as is evident in a 1921 newspaper article headed "White Australia as a Business Proposition":

Before the war, Downing-street was bitterly hostile to the employment of white men in any climate that could be called tropical. [...] In face of the 14,000 Europeans now engaged in sugar-production up north, the 1907 dogma looks like ranking with the famous "infantry preferred" exordium of the S. African War or with the 1914 doctrine that Australian troops would be useless on the Flanders front.

At this point, 'European' is used as a term to emphasize a collectively shared cultural and racial background, directly related to the afore-mentioned 'white men'. The discourse of racial superiority pervades the entire article. The author supports a white employment monopoly in the Tropics. His focus is therefore upon the representation of the 'white body', evoking ideas of physical strength, endurance and morality despite a hostile climate. Adding the term 'European' serves as a label promoting solidarity. This is conspicuous in so far as a lot of Southern European immigrants were employed in the sugar industry in the tropics. Often, they were regarded as having the 'wrong colour' and as unwilling to assimilate into Australian society. A quota system was introduced (in 1924) that discriminated against Southern Europeans, favouring their Northern counterparts. In this example however, the inner-European differences are glossed over.

Creating a healthy white working population in the tropical parts of Queensland and the Northern Territory had been one of the main political and economic concerns at the time of Federation. An ever-growing fear of being taken over by land-hungry Asian nations responded to the growing power of Asia in world affairs. The press played a crucial role, stirring up resentment through circulating common stereotypes. To give an example: In the article "Five Years to Go: Startling Prophecy about the Northern Territory" (1925) which appeared in *Smith's Weekly*, the Japanese were depicted as sly and calculating, eager to take over 'unused land':

But the Japanese continue to watch the Territory quietly. A high official states that their plans are known. They intend to make an issue in four or five years' time of Australia's neglect of the opportunity to develop the Territory and will claim the right of unrestricted admission.

The invasion narrative served as a disciplining tool to urge all Australians to meet their nation-building duties (Walker 2003:40). A denser settlement of the area was seen as an adequate measure to ensure that Australia could retain its territorial integrity.

In her study *Imperial Hygiene* (2004), Alison Bashford has stressed the deep connection between governmental rule and public health. At the beginning of the 20th century, cleanliness, like military force, was seen as a way of taking control of a territory by medical means. Lines of hygiene were regarded as boundaries of rule and national influence. This explains the strong political commitment of the Australian government to claim control of these 'lines': to establish a national border bound by sea, to create a particular kind of society through immigration restrictions and by segregating Indigenous Australians, and to enforce sanitary measures to guarantee the productiveness of the 'white' population (Bashford 2004:1). In summary, tropical medicine played a crucial role in providing scientific knowledge on the viability of the 'project' of 'White Australia' despite hostile climate and tropical diseases.

1920 marked a turning point. A new generation of doctors and scientists, in particular the study group of the *Australian Institute of Tropical Medicine*, were successful in revising older medical concepts. Through extensive field study, climate theories were discredited and medical evidence provided that 'European Australians' would face no physical or mental damage when permanently settling the Tropics. The press reported about new medical findings in a positive light, since the medical remapping of tropical Australia underpinned the ideas of the *White Australia Policy*.

In January 1922 *The Bulletin* featured the article "Half-castes as a Substitute for Railways". The suggestion of Premier Barwell of South Australia to introduce coloured labour to develop the tropical

regions, mainly the Northern Territory, had met vehement opposition. Based upon population data, the journalist, a firm supporter of the *White Australia Policy*, rather argued for the exclusion of non-whites and illiterate whites:

The census of 1911 showed that 572 out of every 1,000 inhabitants were not of European descent [...] (This of course does not include our aboriginal brother.) In addition the so-called Europeans of the Territory were under an unusual amount of suspicion, for the Turk and the Maltese and the whitish British subject [...] are to a great extent honorary Europeans. Out of a population of 3810 located on census day, 1422 read and wrote English; 918 read and wrote some other foreign language, and the rest left the painful subject alone. [...] What the place wants is a new deal and a turn of European civilisation.

Evidently, Europeans were regarded as the most desired inhabitants of the Northern Territory. The exclusivity of the term is enhanced by the specific appellation of the 'Maltese' and the 'Turk'. This is in contrast with other press articles of the time, arguing the position of Turkey and its inhabitants rather as part of the Orient. Similar to other immigrants from Southern Europe, Maltese were often regarded as 'semi-white', but also as reliable workers. Despite shared imperial ties, Maltese immigration to Australia had been prohibited after the Great War. However, Australia was unable to withstand the pressure of the British imperial authorities and immigration resumed. The development of Australia depended on (skilled) labour. Thus, hard-working, healthy (and literate) people were welcomed, as is demonstrated in this quote that labelled both immigrant groups as 'honorary Europeans'. Additionally, it is significant that the term 'British subject' was preceded by the adjective 'white'. The implication of this detailed explanation is that to be 'British' did not equal 'of white colour'. In the light of the historical context, all members of the Commonwealth were considered 'British subjects', for instance Indians, who were seen as a threat to mono-cultural Australia.

Returning to the aforementioned article in *The Bulletin*, the sentence in brackets almost goes unnoticed. The Indigenous peoples of Australia are herein described as "aboriginal brother", excluded and generalised as one extra group neither belonging to the ('white')

Australians nor the immigrants. Although the use of the term 'brother' proposes a friendly relation, what is uppermost in the journalist's mind is that they pose no threat. Their invisibility in the statistics signifies that they are neither regarded a significant part in the future of Australia nor are they given the opportunity to become one. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated attitude. Derogatory stereotyping of Indigenous peoples was common in most of the Australian newspapers of the time. Often, they were depicted as dark-skinned, thick-lipped men and women, referred to as 'Jacky' or 'Mary', barefoot and dressed in rags. Alcoholism was regarded as one of the major problems among the Indigenous population and presented as a cause for laziness and lack of education, as pictured in the caricature "Dry Gin" (1922) by A.S. Petersen in *Smith's Weekly*. In summary, these references reflect that in the process of developing self-images and forming collective (cultural) identities as ('white') Australians, the Indigenous peoples of Australia were regarded as one significant *Other*.

Despite criticizing the governmental incompetence in developing the North especially in regard to a better railway system, the press was in line with the opinion of the younger generation of medical scientists supporting the idea of permanent settlement. However, there was general agreement that this would require better living conditions, such as adequate housing, clothing and health promotion. In "Barbarous Housing in the Tropics" (1926), an anonymous journalist referred to research undertaken by Dr. Cilento of the *Australian Institute of Tropical Medicine*: houses were too small, lacked lining and floors; running water was not always available; water tanks lacked screening from mosquitoes. The Labor government of the day were blamed for this health risk.

Thus, 'white' citizens lacked the preconditions to follow the obligations of medical doctors. As journalist 'Brinjal' points out in "Tropical Australia and the Medical Congress" (1920), "ordinary rules of modern health-protection (therefore needed to be) observed" and their strict observance was to be supervised:

If Australia will not wake up and make a real effort to develop her tropics, she will lose them and with them her nationality. [...] Tropical Australia means hard work and real work [...] say an additional ten thousand families [...] These should be Australian families for choice, or failing sufficient of these, Anglo-Saxon stock. Darwin affords a conclusive demonstration of the undesirability of importing the more savage European tribes to a white man's country.

Here, the author is very specific about the racial background of the desired immigrants. Elaborating on the issue of differentiation among Europeans, I will compare two visual depictions in the printed press. The first is the cartoon 'Nursery Rhymes for Modern Times' by Tom Glover, printed in January 1925 in *The Bulletin*: At a landing jetty, Australia (represented as either young lad or older man – the facial features are not precise) miserably awaits the arrival of a ship full of Southern European immigrants. Repulsion is expressed in the irony of the adapted nursery rhyme underneath as well as the intemperate language, referring to 'foreigners', 'foreign influx' and 'alarming proportions'. The facial features of the perceived aliens enhance the negative reception; their gazes are grim and determined. Interestingly, a comparable cartoon by Finey was published in the same month in *Smith's Weekly*. Southern European immigrants, specifically Yugoslavs, were portrayed in the same degrading way in "Another Dirt Plague". The cartoon has turned them into rats that leave the anchored ship in an Australian port balancing along a rope that is marked with a sign "Better immigration laws". The aim of both images was to foster a negative attitude to immigration from Southern Europe among the readership. While supporters of *White Australia* stressed racial differences and the belief in the inferiority of non-whites, the negative attitude to Southern European immigrants was officially defended by cultural differences.

As the environmental obstacles of settling tropical Australia were removed by new scientific findings, the focus shifted towards questions of public health. Unsanitary ways of living needed to be eradicated to decrease the prevailing dangers of disease and thus to remove the last obstacles for *White Australia*. While formerly being a part of an environmental discourse, proving that the 'coloured' man



Tom Glover (1925), Nursery Rhymes for Modern Times, in: The Bulletin, 8 January 1925, vol. 46, no. 2343, p. 12.

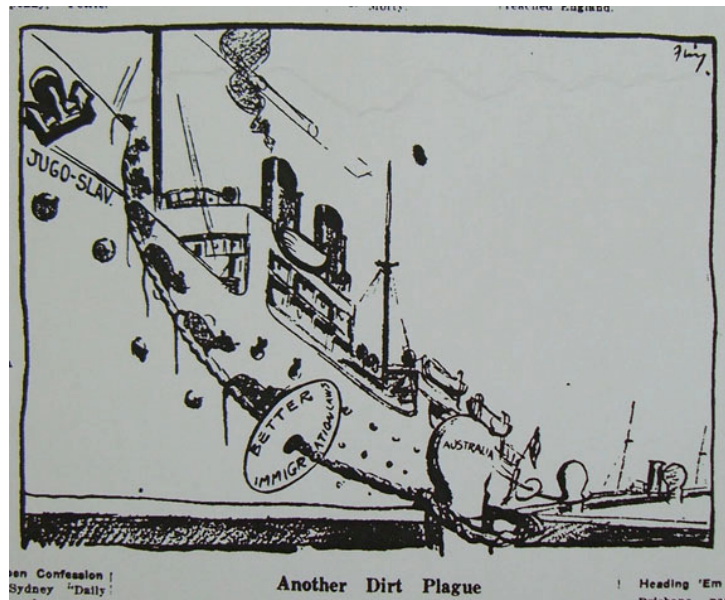
had no physiological advantage over the 'white' man in settling the area, medicine now became a significant element in the discourse of citizenship.

In summary, the analysis of notions of the European within the press debate on Tropical Australia illustrates that representations of the European were utilised to mark out a distinct cultural background. Naturally, the reference 'European' held a positive connotation, in the sense of being civilised, educated, moral and of 'white skin colour', which were the preferred characteristics for ('white') Australian citizenship. Europeans were regarded as the most desired immigrants and hence also as inhabitants for the tropical areas. Often, the ascription would appear beside other categorisations such as 'white' and 'British' as well as in demarcation to 'native' and 'coloured'. In short, media representations of the European also indicated a shared racial background.

This is even more apparent with the demarcation line running between Northern and Southern Europeans. The latter were not sufficiently 'white'. Later, this differentiation would be replaced by a demarcation between Eastern and Western Europeans in regard to political changes in Europe.

Conclusion

As is evident in the Australian case study, identity and alterity are intertwined; the Self is dependent on *Others*. Negotiations about who was considered European for what reasons also took place outside Europe. To follow these processes of definition and constant re-invention of representations, for example in the printed press, reveals mutual, trans-national interrelations between different players. Further, this research provides information on context and purposes in which these notions have been used and how they have been altered in regard to changes in political issues or shifts in belief systems. In short, the construction of the European person via images in the Australian media is a complex process, inevitably connected with historical narratives of the formation and implementation of Australian cultural (and national) identities.



Finey (1925), Another Dirt Plague, in: *Smith's Weekly*, 31 January 1925, no. 50, p. 14.

The world is constantly holding up an inescapable mirror for us, reflecting images of who we think we are, but hiding what others think of us. Questions of identity are difficult to answer, for the past and the present. I recall the following episode during my first research trip to Australia in 2007, which might illustrate this difficulty: On an autumn afternoon in Canberra, I was invited on a stroll through the Botanical Garden. While driving there with an Australian lady in her fifties whose parents had migrated from the Netherlands in the 1950s before she and her siblings had been born, she raised her concerns about the travel plans of her nephew. Together with his friends, he intended to take the risky and highly physically demanding hike along the Kokoda Trail in Papua - New Guinea. "What was she worried about" I asked. She explained she had been on the island herself to do missionary work, and she knew about the dangers of malaria and other tropical diseases. In an exasperated voice she concluded: "We Europeans are just not made to cope well in these tropical areas!"

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