

A new federalism?

Representing Diversity, Resisting Fragmentation: the Relevance of German and European Debates on Federalism to Australian Futures

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As a reaction to the aridity of Centenary debates and their "celebratory" and backward-looking character, the paper poses the question: in view of the widespread disenchantment with the Australian political system, can we learn anything from current debates in Germany and Europe about representing regional and ethnic diversity and the federalist forms which might accommodate them while at the same time furthering the shared values of a European citizenship? National rhetoric in Australia, from whatever direction, has tended to regard diversity as something to ignore, overcome or "tame", rather than a resource for constructing Australian futures. How diverse is Australia? How could this diversity be better represented?

Are we "One Nation", or should we be? Is it possible that both Paul [Keating] and Pauline [Hanson] got it wrong? I am reminded of Dieter Groh's splendid study of German Social Democracy on the eve of the First World War, *Negative Integration and Revolutionary Attentism*.¹ After the belated imposition of German unity from above, Bismarck, like Pauline Hanson, pursued a policy of "negative integration", of defining not who was German but who was not – Marxists, Catholics and anyone else he disliked or feared. Meanwhile the Social Democrats, deeply convinced that history was on their side, waited for the revolution to drop into their laps as they were slowly sucked into the New German Jamboree.

No student of German history can hear the term "one nation" ("one people") without wincing. But is it any less dangerous for others? With the best will in the world, the attempt to define or consolidate a "national identity" has to involve exclusion as much as inclusion, and more often than not has led, fairly directly, to the discrimination of others and the denial of their human rights. This scenario is currently being enacted before our eyes, and certainly not with good will. In an increasingly cosmopolitan world, it is not merely our international reputation that will suffer, but the situation of those within Australia who are adjudged "unwanted gatecrashers".

At a recent workshop, a colleague responded to my brief presentation on the relevance of German and European debates on federalism to Australia with great sympathy, but with the almost automatic qualification: "of course, Australia is a far more homogeneous society". I suppose he meant – that polyglot, heterogeneous Old Europe, and not that Germany, which is probably still considerably more homogeneous than Australia, despite the post-war influx of so-called guest workers and latterly, asylum seekers. But *is* Australia so homogeneous? Are we talking about Point Piper or Cabramatta, the Victorian countryside or the Northern Territory? Or is this homogeneity largely an ideological construct that has survived the radical demographic transformations of the last fifty years, and was not even true before them? Why are we still so keen to stress and believe that Australians are "all the same", and what is their "sameness"? Do they all live in the outback and wear funny hats?

¹ Groh, Dieter, *Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus: die deutsche Sozialdemokratie am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Frankfurt am Main: Propylaen Verlag, 1973.

There's surely no need to demolish the Australian Legend again, but some of its corollaries and hidden premises still badly need exposing. In a recent PhD, Norman Saadi Nikro² argued that Australian society is made up of more or less troublesome ethnics, who need to be treated with a degree of respect and caution, because we are after all a tolerant, progressive, multi-cultural society, and a deethnicised "dominant culture" with no real content, ultimately derived from the legacy of British imperialism, but without any real relation to the lifeworlds and family histories of the Anglo-Australians themselves.³ In his deeply ironic piece on "The Destructive Character", Walter Benjamin wrote: "how enormously the world is simplified if we consider what deserves destruction". A British theorist of Empire might have responded: "How enormously colonial rule is simplified if we assume the colonisers are all the same". This is perhaps the common root of the myths of homogeneity and egalitarianism; the "sameness" of the colonisers opposes the "strangeness" of the landscape and the "others". As Krishan Kumar writes: "The Empire drew more closely together the different ethnic groups inhabiting Britain, English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish. They were joined in common governance of the far-flung empire. They were also united, one might say, by their equal share in the plunder of empire..."⁴

For Kumar and others, there is thus an intimate link between the internal colonisation of the British peoples, the project of Empire and the consolidation of "Britishness", which is consequently "undermined by the end of the empire and by Britain's decline as a world power".⁵ In Australia, the process of internal devolution in Britain, the eventual consequence of this "undermining", has attracted little attention or sympathy, and is usually regarded as a kind of nationalistic atavism. It can be looked at quite differently, but this necessarily means questioning that very imperial ideology of Britishness which lies at the dead centre of our dominant culture. Devolution demands the democratisation of centralist structures imposed initially on the internally, and then the externally colonised. This imposition could be accepted so long as it guaranteed "plunder" and "protection" to the participants, but could no longer be sustained in their absence.

Of course, the situation in Britain is not unique; there are many and varied movements in Europe for greater regional autonomy which, at least since the Maastricht treaty, have the official blessing of the European Union. Is this just another eccentric Brussels sprout, like the standardisation of condoms, or may it in fact turn out to be the most important and even progressive turn in the treaty? Why should the EU concern itself with regions? Isn't the Yugoslav example a clear enough warning of where fragmentation can lead?

It may well be that the Union itself suffers from a "democratic deficit", though there are strong moves with the EU itself to address the problem, and it is important to distinguish between processes and outcomes. For instance, decisions of the European Court of Justice are often greeted with a hail of protest as infringing national sovereignty, but they often protect the disadvantaged against discrimination by their own states. There is a notable

² Norman Saadi Nikro, *Shifting Margins, Imaginary Journeys: Writing Migrant Experience*, Ph.D. thesis, University of New South Wales 1997, p. 234.

³ John Milfull, "Introduction: Australia, the New Britain and the New Europe: an Identity or Three?", in J.M. (ed.), *Britain in Europe Prospects for change*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999.

⁴ Krishan Kumar, "'Britishness and 'Englishness': what prospect for a European identity in Britain today?", in *British Studies Now*, anthology issues 1-5, The British Council 1995, p. 88.

⁵ p. 93.

silence among these critics about the quality of democracy at the national level, the extent to which it recognises and guarantees the right to difference and diversity. The more centralist (and ex-imperialist) the regime, the more it clings to a notion of "national sovereignty" born from the domination of the internally and externally colonised.

Increasingly, the European debate is shifting towards a combination of the EU as the guarantor of civil and social rights – what we might simply term *European citizenship* – and the economic basis they require, and the development and encouragement of multiple identities: regional, ethnic and sub-national.⁶ This is nicely summed up in a recent article on Scotland in *Le Monde Diplomatique*:

Who is a Scot? "It's all about embracing multiple identities", says Prince Emmanuel Obike, a health service executive who lives in Glasgow. "I'm Nigerian, I'm Scottish and I'm Jewish! That's multiple identity for you, and that's what it means to be a real Scot."⁷

There is no doubt that the "umbrella function" of the EU and the encouragement it has provided for regional autonomy has played a vital role in the devolution process, and has made an indirect but substantial contribution to the peace process in Northern Ireland. It is no longer necessary to "fight" for the recovery of suppressed identities; the new tri-level structure of the Union, supra-national, national and sub-national, allows them to be accommodated within what we might call the "multiple identity" of Europe itself. I like to think that, if only the European Community had not been distracted from the collapse of the Yugoslav economy by events in East Central Europe and the Soviet Union, and had offered it rapid admission to the EC and economic support, the whole grisly chain of events which followed might have been avoided. There is a moral there for the process of Eastern enlargement.

If the "new regionalism" is, above all, a belated remedy for the excesses of internal colonisation, there are many other reasons for the increasing appeal, and encouragement of, devolved structures. The remoteness of government from the electorate, the decline in power of national governments *vis-à-vis* international players and the petrification of the party system have led to increasing demands for a layer of government closer to those it is meant to represent. The EU borrowed a rather unfortunate term from the Catholic Church to describe this aim, "subsidiarity", but however menacing and abstract it may sound, it expresses a real and pressing need. The clear and desirable direction of European politics leads to a new and complex form of federalism which, in countries like Britain and France, dare not speak its name, but in others has entirely positive connotations. After Bismarck's negative integration of the Germans and its horrific culmination in the totalitarian centralism of the Third Reich, the Basic Law of the Federal Republic established a new and democratised "Germany of the Regions", which has served not only West Germany, but the new German state since unification exceptionally well. No nation was ever more "unified" (in the passive sense as well, that the term implies) than Hitler's Germany; the desire to avoid national identifications that followed its end was not merely an imposition, but a real blessing. To be a good European and a Rheinlander seemed infinitely more comfortable and productive than to embark on the fraught enterprise of redefining "the

⁶ John Loughlin et al., *Subnational Democracy in the European Union: Challenges and Opportunities*, Oxford University Press 2001.

⁷ "Land Reform and National Identity. Scotland Plc" by Alastair McIntosh and Vèrene Nicolas, *Le Monde diplomatique* November 2001

German". Ironically, it was the expedient use of Article 23 to permit the rapid accession of 5 magically reconstituted states in East Germany rather than the constitutional convention required by Article 146 that proved the only real balm for the wounds of internal colonisation so many East Germans felt after 1990. Again, it proved easier to reinvent a Thuringian or Saxon identity than to define "the New German" in any appealing way.

But what about the "externally colonised"? Some years ago, I wrote an essay on "revolution envy" in Germany, whose history has so often been described as an unending series of "failed revolutions", and came to a conclusion that surprised myself, that failure perhaps was preferable to the enshrinement of contradiction in a national foundation myth.⁸ It is hard to identify the French middle class as the children of Marat and Babeuf. In a country which still hasn't managed even to turn itself into a minimalist republic, it is easy to envy such foundation myths – they sure beat Gallipoli – but they, too, spawn their own negative ideologies. Of course, in Australia, once the indigenous population had been decimated and marginalised and the "lesser breeds without the law" put in their proper place, it was hard to envisage any cathartic act of independence. A revolution of the expedient union of colonisers against their elder brothers hardly grasps the imagination, perhaps the Americans found the right image in a subversive Tea Party – at school, I thought that the Rum Rebellion summed it up. In this kind of settler society, it's never been easy to separate the goodies and baddies.

But again, there can be some advantages in a less spectacular past. The Germans, with help from their former enemies, stumbled upon a federalist democracy into which they grew; the path from heroic beginnings has often proved more difficult. The fifty years since Indian independence, the experiences of *Midnight's Children*, have scarcely fulfilled the dreams of Gandhi and Nehru, partly, at least, because the temptation to construct a binary opposition between the British colonisers and the colonised was fraudulent, even then – not only because of the complex interaction of native and metropolitan culture in the elites, but because of the extraordinary social, ethnic and religious diversity of the colonised. Yet it seems to me that the writer Sachidanandan, reflecting on the experience of these fifty years, has marked a direction for Australian politics as well. For him, it demands

a pursuit of the politics of difference reflected in an attempt to forge collective identities based on differences of class, caste, gender, region, language and culture as a response to the homogenisation of Indian culture sought by hegemonic forces...⁹

Multiculturalism and heteroglossia are necessary elements in the struggle against "atavism", the attempted revival of an ethnic past, against a dilution of federal structures and the continuing pressure of "standardisation" exerted by the culture industry.¹⁰ The way forward lies not in the quest for a lost, perhaps never possessed, national identity, but in the productive acceptance of the hybridity and diversity of Indian societies. Noble as Gandhi's and Nehru's differing visions of a free and united India were, they contained the totalising seeds of both native and European traditions of a "national unity" from above, even if in the colonial context "above" could present itself as "below".

⁸ "The Death of the French Revolution in the German Theatre. Büchner, Weiss, Müller", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 1991, pp. 279-285.

⁹ K. Sachidanandan, *Literature: Signing in Different Scripts*, in *Independent India, The First Fifty Years*, ed. Hirnamay Larlekar, New Delhi 1998 (O.U.P.), 53-371 (p. 371).

¹⁰ p. 358.

And Australia? In comparison, the struggle for "national unity" we have been celebrating this year manifestly lacks both heroism and vision. Australian federation was a slow and pragmatic project. The difference in railway gauges we learned about at school as the decisive argument had still not been overcome when I changed trains in Albury fifty years later. At least in part, it sprang from the deep-rooted fear of the colonisers, thinly spread over a vast country, far from the imperial parent and easy prey to the Asian hordes that menaced from the North. "Holding together", the title of Donald Horne's federation series, was perhaps more appropriate than he thought: *holding together to keep out the others* and *holding on to the land together*. We have little reason to look back into the past for feel-good moments, but this could be turned to our positive advantage. It is not our empty and imposed "sameness" we need to rediscover, but our differences, then and now. It was no accident that the only really successful event of the Federation calendar was the celebration of difference in the evening concert at Sydney's Centennial Park, even if now and then it verged on the glorification of the melting pot rather than on the creative affirmation of difference.

Australians, new, old, or however defined, are nervous about difference; the heritage of the colonial myth of egalitarianism, the defensive equality of mediocrity, and its extension in the still powerful assimilationist pressures of the post war migration policy seem often to render us blind to the best in our own society and lead to identification with "battlers" like Howard and Hanson, whose greatest strength is that no one could think them intimidating or superior. I have been struck by the acute unwillingness of ethnic community groups to build on the contributions they make, or have made, to the cultural and political life of the country; their energy is largely focused on cultural preservation, often at the expense of their unwilling children. A creative politics of difference is not about the maintenance of ethnic and cultural enclaves, but about participation and the representation of diversity, both culturally and politically. There is a secret and rather unpleasant tie between the bland multiculturalism most feel obliged to affirm, at least in public, and the search for a quick fix to centuries of injustice in "reconciliation";¹¹ both seek to re-establish the myth of identity on a respectable basis, and politely close the discussion.

I have no illusions about the possibility and pace of cultural change in Australia, but I feel that the most appropriate way of celebrating our birthday would have been to look to the future, not to the past, and that one of the roads to this future might be to engage with the debate overseas in which these ideas find their most concrete and innovative expression, the new federalism debate. We might even begin to regard the differences between our states, regions and capital cities as something to be affirmed, encouraged and developed, and not just as subjects for party jokes; we might follow Canada's lead and recognise the claims of our first citizens to an autonomous state and direct representation; above all, we might try together to smash the empty carapace of our dominant culture and liberate the creative diversity it has pressed down on for so many years. Perhaps we might even try to free our universities from the Tweedledum of the *unified national system* and the Tweedledee of the *global education market*? Who knows what might be possible?

¹¹ See Ravi de Costa, "Reconciliation or identity in Australia", *National Identities*, vol. 2 no. 3 (November 2000), 277-291.