

Constructing the Geography of Racism in Sydney

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Introduction

In October-November 2001, the UNSW Racism Survey sampled 5056 respondents, 1845 of them living in the Sydney Statistical District. The survey's aims included the collection of data about racist attitudes and experiences. Data concerning racist attitudes are addressed in the following paragraphs, in order to determine the nature and extent of racist attitudes in Sydney and to identify possible local types that could be used as a reference to construct local-focused anti-racist policies.

The complex shapes of racism

According to recent theory, racism is to be taken as a complex and dynamic phenomenon: there are different forms of racism, which are linked to representations of diversity, according to criteria from the socio-biological category of race to more contemporary conceptions of cultural hierarchies or incompatibilities. While 83.5% of Sydneysiders support cultural diversity, only 75.6% declared feeling secure in a context of ethnic diversity, and more dramatically, 45.6% thought that Australia is weakened by ethnic diversity. This paradoxical situation is not specific to Sydney but exists for the whole sample of Queensland and NSW; this is evidence of the complex nature of racism.

Racist vocabulary reflects the diversity of the phenomenon itself. Wieviorka (1995) and Jayasuriya (2002) have distinguished between 'old' and 'new' racisms, the latter being less overt ("I am not racist, but...") and based more on the intolerance of cultural difference. For example, the 'new' racisms vocabulary deploys the category of 'Ethnics', holding a hidden reference to colour or to a cultural 'Otherness', keeping an invisible reference to a normative Whiteness, avoiding a mention of 'race', which is typical of 'old' racism. It is true that belief in race does not equate neatly with racism, but belief in racial hierarchy does, as does belief in the need for racial separatism.

Racisms, old and new

A first step towards the solution of the paradox identified above could be a study of the actual extent of 'old' and 'new' racisms. There is still a widespread belief in 'races': 77% of Sydneysiders agreed with the assertion that "humankind is made up of separate races", which is only marginally lower than the percentage for Queensland and NSW (77.6%). However, this level shows a lack of education regarding 'racial' issues rather than a belief in a biological division of the human kind into separate races. Beliefs in racial hierarchy and in racial separatism are better indicators of 'old' racism. Belief that "all 'races' are not equal", is carried by 11.8% of people in Sydney,

which was similar to the percentage for Queensland and NSW (11.7%). Racial separatism, which relies on the belief that people of different 'races' should not mix with each other, has a slightly lesser influence in Sydney (12.7%) than in the whole NSW and Queensland (13.2%).

Table1. Belief in racial hierarchy, racial separatism, and racialism, by ethnicity, gender, age and education, Sydney 2001.

%		Do believe racial equality*	Believe sexual separation**	Believe in 'races'***
LOTE	Yes	13.3	15.6	67.6
	No	11.2	11.7	80.3
Birthplace	Overseas	13.2	15.8	65.6
	UK/NZ	11.8	10.0	80.6
	Australia	11.2	11.9	80.7
ATSI	Yes	0.0	9.5	76.2
	No	11.9	12.7	77.0
Gender	Female	10.5	11.9	75.6
	Male	13.4	13.7	78.8
Age	18-34	8.1	8.3	69.5
	35-64	12.1	12.6	77.5
	65+	16.4	19.5	87.3
Education	Tertiary	10.4	10.2	75.0
	Non-tertiary	12.6	14.1	78.2
All		11.8	12.7	77.0

Question wording: Do you disagree or agree that:

*All races of people are equal?

**It is not a good idea for people of different races to marry one another?

***Humankind is made up of separate races?

(Source: The UNSW Racism Survey, telephone survey, Oct-Dec 2001)

Over one in ten people in Sydney had views compatible with 'old' racisms, and this is not specific to Sydney but to both states: NSW and Queensland. This figure varies according to ethnicity, age, gender and education (Table 1): beliefs in races according to the languages spoken by the respondents: 80.3% of those who spoke only English believed in 'races' compared to only 67.6% otherwise. This is a noteworthy difference. Interestingly, the proportion of people who do not believe in racial equality is stronger among those who speak a language other than English (13.3% versus 11.2%), similarly to the belief in sexual separation. An explanation could be that people from a non-English speaking background observe that 'racial' equality and 'racial' mixing are impeded in reality, without necessarily expressing a racist preference.

Birthplace plays the same role as language: people born in Australia are more likely to believe in 'races' (80.7% against 65.6% of people born overseas), but less likely to believe in

racialism and racial separatism (respectively 11.2% and 11.9% for the Australia-born, 13.2% and 15.8% for the overseas-born). There is a similarity between the Australia-born and the UK/NZ born, especially regarding belief in ‘races’ and in a racial hierarchy. This is another constant trend within the dataset, which can be observed at the city and the state scales, showing how the colonial context still feeds a strong linkage between Australia, the former colonial power and the Kiwi neighbour.

Meanwhile, the differences in the belief in ‘race’ according to ethnicity and age shows how strong this belief is in Australia, most probably the legacy of the White Australia period. This belief is less widespread among the younger generations: present at 87.3% among people over 65 years old, the figure is 77.5 % for the 35-64 age category, and “only” 69.5% for the 18-34 group. Age is an important variable when examining racist attitudes. Concerning belief in racial hierarchy is at its maximum (16.4%) among people over 65; it decreases to 12.1% among the 35-64 years old, until 8.1% for the youngest group (18-34). Variations in racial separatism are in the same order: the percentage varying from 19.5%, through 12.6%, to 8.3%. Old racism may be fading as time passes, especially in the era of multicultural Australia. Belief in ‘races’ remains strong for both males (78.8%) and females (75.6%); and for those with tertiary education (75.0%), it has less hold than those without (78.2%). The latter points at the importance of general education in order to further people’s awareness about ‘racial’ issues. People with tertiary degrees are less supportive of racial hierarchy (10.4%, but 12.6% otherwise) and of the need for sexual separatism (10.2% and 14.1%).

As a general trend, we observe that women are more open-minded than men in terms of their belief in racial hierarchy (10.5% of women and 13.4% of men stated that all ‘races’ are not equal) and sexual separatism (supported by 11.9% of women and 13.7% of men). This confirms the views of a major theoretical trend linking issues of race and gender, racism and sexism. Women are more aware of gender disadvantages in society, and are more likely to perceive problems of social disadvantage. As a consequence they are more reluctant to accept and express an oppressive attitude, such as racism.

This is true for Indigenous Australians as well, whose attitudes appear to be amongst the least racist in the whole sample, but especially in Sydney. Every indigenous person surveyed in Sydney agreed to the statement, “all ‘races’ of people are equal”; this figure must be read in the light of the small size of the ATSI sample, but it reflects a reality in which there is a high awareness amongst indigenous people regarding ‘race’ debates and Australian colonial and post-colonial history. This paragraph confirms opinions expressed during consultations with civil society on racism: “The inherently racist process of colonisation provided the basis and continued presence of systemic racism in Australia. (...) The consequences of colonialism are evident in the disadvantaged position of Indigenous Australians today” (HREOC, 2001). Apart from the influence of history and education, the fear of ‘ethnic’ diversity depends potentially on

the experiences of diversity. One of the strong arguments found in the Chicago School approaches is that there is a correlation between racism and the experience of cultural diversity, which can vary across time. We assume that the experience of cultural diversity decreases the extent of old racisms, but, as well that the experience of diversity only is not sufficient to eradicate old racisms. To justify this view, we compared the data on old racisms with those dealing with the level of mixing between people from different ethnic or cultural background. Table 2 shows a higher rate of support for ‘old’ racist ideologies by people who do not mix with the ‘Other’: the disparity is spectacular regarding racial separatism, from 10.6% supporting the latter among people who declared having contact with the ‘Others’ in their workplace supported racial separatism as compared to 21.6% among those who ‘do not mix’.

Table 2. Old racisms and the experience of ethnic or cultural mixing, Sydney 2001

	Never mix	Mix	Never mix	Mix
	In workplace****	In workplace****	In social life****	In social life****
Do not believe in racial equality*	16.0	11.2	20.0	11.1
Believe in sexual separation**	21.6	10.6	29.3	11.2
Believe in 'races' ***	80.9	76.3	82.1	76.6

Question wording: Do you disagree or agree that:

*All races of people are equal?

**It is not a good idea for people of different races to marry one another?

***Humankind is made up of separate races?

****How often do you mix with members of other cultural groups in your workplace/in your social life?

(Source: The UNSW Racism Survey, telephone survey, Oct-Dec 2001)

The disparities are more dramatic if we consider people who mix or do not mix in their social life. From this we conclude that cultural contact decreases the extent of old racisms, especially in places where people do not necessarily have the choice to ‘mix’ or not, such as in the workplace. Racist attitudes take different forms. In Sydney, there may be a core of racists (representing maybe 10-12% of the population) who agree with the idea of a racial hierarchy and ‘inferior races’, nowadays gathered under the diaphanous denomination of ‘ethnic’ (what theorists call the process of “racialization”, see Jackson, 1993). ‘Old’ and ‘new’ racisms often coexist, at all scales.

Construction of the nation and White normalcy

Nation is one of the most important symbolic levels where racism is articulated (Jackson, 1993). Examining what people understand as ‘ethnic’ and ‘Australia’ addresses the paradox enunciated in the first paragraph. Clearly, we can say that there is a strong majority supporting cultural diversity. However, almost half the Sydney sample (46.6%) was ready to identify “cultural or ethnic groups that do not fit into Australian society”, as presented in Table 5.4 (44.9% in Queensland and NSW).

Ideologies of nationhood, ideas about what constitutes the national identity, and the role played by Whiteness as an invisible norm, form the key background to racist attitudes. Hage theorised racist attitudes as a nationalist practice. He argued that racist violence during the first Gulf War was “‘informed’ by racist modes of classification, better conceived as nationalist practices: practices which assume, first, an image of a national space; secondly, an image of the nationalist himself or herself as master of this national space and, thirdly, an image of the ethnic/racial other as a mere object within this space” (Hage, 1998:28). This statement does not only reinscribe inside the nationalist realm, it asserts that racism cannot exist outside a territory to which people assign a national identity. This identity in Australia is constituted of the controlling power that White people (in this case) have over this territory, and consequently over people ‘invited’ or ‘tolerated’ on this territory. Ethnicity, gender, age and education again differentiate those who are more/less likely to act as ‘space managers’ (Hage, 1998).

Which groups cannot “fit” into Australia?

People were asked which cultural or ethnic groups they thought did not fit into Australian society, and were given the choice of three answers. Those from the “Middle East” (31.9%) and “Muslims” (26.3%) were most frequently cited, and then came Asians (24.5%, including all regions of Asia), followed by an undetermined category of “Ethnics” (7.6%). Firstly, these results testify to a considerably high level of Islamophobia. Anti-Islamic feeling had certainly not minimized at the time the survey was undertaken, in the three months following 11th September 2001, reminding us of the constructed and dynamic nature of Islamophobia, according to constructivist approaches. Concern about marrying a Muslim was the only case in this survey where women appeared to be less tolerant than men: this certainly has to deal with the status of women in Islam. Dunn stated (2001: 294) that one of the key Western stereotypes of Islam is that it is ‘specifically and peculiarly repressive to women’. Islamophobia was a little stronger in Sydney than in the whole NSW and Queensland. Secondly, Asians represent an important group of migrants in Australia, and have often been singled out as a cause of social division and a threat to the Australian ‘identity’; the media focus on suburbs like Cabramatta being a representative instance. Thirdly, the category of “Ethnics” does not denote a determined population except in a representation of non-White people by White, “normal” people (Hage, 1998). Again, we see the influence of Whiteness as an invisible normalcy inspired by a tradition of eurocentrism and a feeling of Western societies’ cultural superiority (Bonnett, 1996; Jackson, 1998; Kobayashi and Peake, 2000). The data about ‘Ethnics’ confirm this point. Fourthly, there is still a high level of prejudice against Aboriginal Australian people, with 30% of respondents being concerned if one of their relatives were to marry an indigenous Australian. A significant minority in Sydney, particularly people older than 65, still do not consider Aboriginal Australians as appropriate Australians, assigning them a separate position within society: 2% of the respondents in

Sydney judged that Aboriginal people did not ‘fit’ into Australian society. Clearly, colonial ideologies, such as those of ‘Terra Nullius’ and of the White Australia policy remain strong among some respondents. Fifthly, Australians of Jewish faith endure the same levels of concern as Asian Australians with 25.7% of the respondents concerned about marriage with a Jew. Almost no variation exists according to age, tertiary education and gender, suggesting the presence of a diffused anti-Semitism, which could be part of Australia’s imported cultural capital. Anti-Semitism has however traditionally not been so visible in the ‘race’ debate in Australia; in the media as well as in literature. However, the Australian Council on Jewry have reported increased anti-Semitic attacks in the last two years.

Self-identification of prejudice, recognition of racism

Whether prejudice is explicit or can reveal the nature of one’s attitude towards racism; awareness about the extent of racism has to be explored. Research about racism in Queensland and NSW showed that 12% of the sample admitted having a prejudice against other cultures. Furthermore, people who were most likely to admit such a prejudice were older people, males and those without tertiary education (Forrest et al., 2003: 16-17). The Sydney data reveal a higher percentage of self-declared prejudiced, with 14.3%. A higher percentage of males, older people with a critical limit closer to 35 than 65, and non-tertiary educated people described themselves as ‘prejudiced’. Indigenous people were less likely to describe themselves as prejudiced, as was the case for the whole NSW and Queensland.

While only 14.3% of the Sydney sample admitted a personal prejudice, 81.6% were of the view that there was racial prejudice in Australia; similar levels were found for the whole NSW and Queensland. It is then logical to conclude that there is racism, but people would rather think that it touches others. There is more evidence for this difficulty of admitting racism as a real phenomenon when we ask who reaps the benefits of racial discrimination. While a wide majority acknowledged the existence of racism, 43.1% of respondents would deny there is any Anglo-Celtic privilege. This attitude is influenced by ethnicity only, not by age, gender nor education. Those born in Australia, UK or New Zealand and who speak English only disputed privilege more than the others. However, people who speak a language other than English and those born overseas (excluding UK and New Zealand) were more likely to state that there was an Anglo privilege in Australia, which is another proof of the heavy legacy of Australia’s colonial history.

Spatial variations of racist attitudes in Sydney

The distance to the average has been calculated for each Sydney Statistical Local Area (SLA) and each attitudinal indicator. These distances have been summed for each SLA: the map represents Sydney SLAs according to their overall distances to the average.

The map shows a high level of spatial variation. There is a general distinction between Inner Sydney, its surroundings

SLAs, Ku-ring-gai, and all other SLAs. The former have the lowest overall levels of racist attitudes. They are in contrast with the Central Western suburbs (with Willoughby), Liverpool, the Outer South Western and Outer North Western Sydney. However, Figure 1 reveals local variations, for instance Woollahra as an island surrounded by Cosmopolitan areas Inner Sydney and the Eastern suburbs, or Kogarah (near Hurstville). To identify the nature of the local patterns of racist attitudes, and to relate these local definitions to the wider context of the metropolis, the data of the Racism Survey was analysed using a combination of principal components analysis and hierarchical clustering. Three typologies emerged from this statistical study.



Map: Variations of racist attitudes across Sydney Statistical District, 2001 (Source: The UNSW Racism Survey – Oct-Dec 2001)

The first one is characterised by a low overall level of racist attitudes, high cultural diversity and awareness of the ‘racism issue’ in Australia. This type comprises the Statistical Sub-Divisions (SSDs) of Inner Sydney and Inner Western Sydney. The second local type corresponds to areas where the ‘White gaze’ finds its strongest expressions. It consists of low diversity combined with little mixing, cultural prejudice and a denial of racial prejudice in Australia. This ‘White normalcy’ of this type is found more often in those SLAs that are part of Gosford-Wyong, Northern Beaches and Outer Western Sydney regions. The third type is defined by high diversity, feelings of insecurity, racial separatism, and the fear that diversity weakens the national identity. Local areas of Fairfield-Liverpool, Canterbury-Bankstown, Central Western Sydney and Outer South Western Sydney are more likely to belong to this type. It is important to notice that these different types can coexist locally, at the SLA scale. Several SSDs have very contrasting profiles, as in the case of Blacktown where the most tolerant and the most racist attitudes coexist, or Central Northern Sydney that have an average profile for every indicator.

Conclusion

The first aim of a geography of racism in Sydney is to describe local expressions of wider processes related to a

constructed national identity, invisible references to a ‘White normalcy’ and echoes of Australian colonial and post-colonial history. The typologies provided by this research should not be used to make artificial generalisations about Sydney’s localities, but to help construct local anti-racist policies embedded in local situations.

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