In Search of Meaning: A Study of the Sociology Of Ethnicity, Culture and Symbolism, And Its Implications For A Policy Of Multiculturalism

by

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* taken from Geertz, 1973:5

Abstract

The basic postulate of this thesis is that Multiculturalism as government policy in Australia fails because it attempts an unstated, conceptual division between what the thesis will define as cultural pluralism and what it will define as structural pluralism. The thesis suggests that government perpetuates this division partly out of its own conceptual limitations, but mostly out of an ideological imperative to control and direct social relations so that it retains government; in this instance, it seeks to appease ethnic voters and voters intellectually sympathetic to ethnic concerns.

Through a review of literature available on the subject, the thesis argues that this conceptual failure occurs because Multiculturalism as theory inherits the founding tenets of liberal humanism - a Western way of thinking that places the autonomous, sovereign individual at its centre as its core value, and the associated notion of human nature as its replacement for an all encompassing universal nature created by God. Structuralist sociology, the thesis argues, has

traditionally depended upon these tenets.

The thesis will seek recourse to sociological and critical approaches that do not so depend: primarily the anti-essentialist theories of poststructuralism, and secondarily the consocial formulation of ethnic identity found in the Honolulu School of Keesing, Howard, Linnekin and Poyer. The thesis will, through analysis of the cornerstone concept of Multiculturalism, ethnicity and ethnic identity, disquisite an unsubstantiated use of the concept 'symbol', and the process of symbolisation, which epistemologically unhinges the sociological concept of ethnicity. The thesis thus seeks to establish a workable concept of symbol and symbolisation that takes account of the influences of ideology and social practice on ethnicity and ethnic identity. Poststructuralist analysis in particular provides this.

The thesis then examines an example from the author's own experience - the Hong Kong Chinese - whose ambivalent attitudes concerning their own ethnic identity in general, and that of Business Migrants to Australia and Canada in particular, show the existing theoretical weakness of sociological concepts of ethnicity. This example is then used to show how the theory of symbolism developed in the thesis, Deep Symbol theory, can be applied to sociological analysis of ethnicity in a way

that does substantiate a working concept of ethnic identity.

The thesis will then conclude with a brief application of Deep Symbol theory to multicultural theory and multicultural government policy and practice in Australia to illustrate the extent to which the theory ameliorates the problematic bifurcation of structural and cultural pluralism referred to above. Particular reference will be made to education and the arts.