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"Making Black White"

Sugar Consumption and Racial Unity in Australia

My doctoral thesis[1] investigates as a central topic the racist societalization from the eighteenth to the twentieth century in Australia (Affeldt 2014). It looks, in particular, at the processes of everyday 'production' and 'reproduction' of "race" as a social relation. This regards not only the so-called White Australia policy but also a comprehensive white culture that stimulated participation of broad sections of the mainstream population. My study examines an issue that was literally in everyone's mouth at the beginning of the twentieth century: – sugar; to be precise *white* cane sugar, cultivated and produced in Queensland. It was white not only regarding its visible purity. Much more importantly, after some arduous demographic and social transformations, Queensland sugar attained a *double whiteness* – chemically and, most notably, ideologically.

The title of this essay is taken from a newspaper article in *The Worker*, one of the mouthpieces of the labour movement and the most vociferous, at least as far as White Sugar was concerned. "Making Black White. The Sugar Transformation in Australia" (*The Worker* 1909: 7) was published at a watershed moment in the history of White Sugar in Australia. The sugar industry was considered racially white, i.e., the deportation of the South Sea Islanders had paved the way to the recruitment of European, preferably British, workers. It was, however, not yet a "white man's industry" (Chataway 1921: 140), in the sense that the working and living conditions in the cane sugar districts were not deemed suitable for European standards and thus white workers' willingness to engage in the sugar industry remained low. The newspaper article further emphasizes the importance of White Sugar for White Australia by stating

> In no direction has the White Australia question had a more important bearing than with respect to the production of sugar. The solution of the black labor problem was one of the first difficulties confronting the Australian Parliament. But the national legislature boldly grasped the nettle. It passed measures to stimulate the production of 'white' sugar, and in the historic Pacific Island Laborers Act [sic] regulated and then prohibited the introduction of kanakas for work in the canefields. (ibid.)

This sets the scene for the investigation of a particular occurrence of racism – a racism that has its focus not so much on a financial profit but rather an ideological benefit. The benefit, however, was (quite literally) dearly bought by the Australians who, more often than not, willingly paid a high price for cane sugar. This disposition to bear the pecuniary burden as an acknowledgement of the allegedly superior status of white Australians was firmly rooted in an intensifying global discourse on white supremacy at the turn of the twentieth century. Furthermore, with the

1 This essay is a revised and expanded version of the talk given as laureate at the award ceremony for the Dissertation Prize 2016 by the Association for Australian Studies in October 2016.

consumption of "white" sugar, theoretical negotiations of racial hierarchies were translated into practices of everyday life.

The commonly narrow discussion of White Australia often evades the full spectrum of its embeddedness in the culture of the time. White Australia was omnipresent. Representations of its ideal found entrance into, amongst other things, stories and poems, movies and paintings, theatrical pieces and songs (including the national anthem *Advance Australia Fair*). The overwhelming importance of White Australia around 1900 (Affeldt 2010) makes obvious that the notion of whiteness is more than a purely political ideology inspired by crude economic motives. Rather, the phenomenon of Australia's desire for a racially homogeneous population has to be located within a broader context of culture and society. The case of White Sugar illustrates the intricate entanglement of colonialism, politics and daily routines that welded together an otherwise socially diverse society and invoked national consciousness in favour of the consolidation as a white nation.

"White" as a category in a racial colour spectrum had been developed throughout the eighteenth century. Only during the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, did it define the social status in the sense that even the lower classes of European societies could and would identify themselves as being "white" (Allen 2012: 10; Hund 2008: 175). As a social relation, therefore, whiteness had to be painstakingly constructed by class-spanning identity formation. World fairs and colonial exhibitions were occasions on which the unifying notion of whiteness was disseminated. These not only exhibited technological inventions and manufactured commodities but – with anthropological displays, live performances and human zoos – also contrasted European progress with an alleged backwardness of Indigenous people (Poignant 2004; Zimmerman 2001: 20). Such exhibitions were designed to illustrate "the progress that had led to modern civilisations" (Secord 2004: 140). The European commodity culture these exhibitions celebrated brought forth an institutionalized system of "commodity racism", which fostered the popularising of the previously developed theories of scientific racism (McClintock 1995: 33). The purported superiority of white people was set in contrast to non-white inferiority and popularized scientific racism by making material 'whiteness' available (as affordable commodity) for the masses. More than anything it was consumption of valuable (i.e. refined) colonial goods, like tea, coffee, cocoa and cane sugar, that reinforced notions of white supremacy in the everyday situations of all social strata.

At this, sugar played a particular role. It had been a luxury good for the upper classes in Europe for centuries (Mintz 1986: 140); but it was the interaction of European expansion endeavours (colonial land-taking) and cost-effective production conditions (slavery) in the so-called New World that enabled a rapid dissemination of the sweet good throughout the British society. In the course of the eighteenth century, sugar was consumed in ever greater amounts even by the lower classes. By the mid-nineteenth century – at the time of the first colonial exhibitions – it had virtually become a nutritional necessity for all members of British society (Mintz 2008: 94). This was an expression of sugar's socially cohesive character: its class-spanning and gender-bridging consumption united Europeans while the workers in the colonies had to do the arduous work. In this respect, sugar's chromatic whiteness was combined with the burgeoning concept of *social whiteness* – the exploitation of "blacks" stood opposite to the joint indulgence by "whites".

The thus ideologically charged sugar cane arrived with the First Fleet in Botany Bay in 1788 (Bell 1956: 7). At first its cultivation failed due to climatic circumstances – but the expansion of the British settlement towards the northern regions of the continent provided better cultivation possibilities. Consequently, sugar cane was already closely connected to the occupation of Australia. The seizure of the continent was based on the legal concept of *terra nullius* (Fitzmaurice 2007) – and thus on the original populations' alleged failure to put the soil to "good use". The expansion of agriculture then became the legitimation of the British land seizure, which, evidently, was accompanied by disastrous consequences for the Indigenous Australians (Tatz 1999; Markus 2001).

The ideological burden of sugar cane cultivation – its political and social charge as a product of "black", or at least unfree labour – was also imported. It had been the intention that the convicts, shunned and expelled from British society and transported overseas, would cultivate the sugar cane as a measure of social rehabilitation. However, at the time when sugar cane was about to be grown in economically relevant scopes, convict transportation to New South Wales had already been ended. Since these (forcedly) servile and inexpensive workers were no longer available, a substitute labour resource was sought for and found on the close-by islands of the New Hebrides (today Vanuatu) and the Solomon Islands (Banivanua-Mar 2007; Berry 2000; Moore 1985).

Starting in the mid-1860s, the South Sea Islanders (then known as Pacific Islanders or "kanakas") were – partly by force, partly by deception – recruited for work in the sugar cane fields (Saunders 1982: 20). With their help, the Queensland sugar industry soon became one of the most important industries of Australia, not least due to the Australians' penchant for sweetness. Opposition to the recruitment of South Sea Islanders was voiced from the beginning, in particular by the labour movement; but it was not until four decades later that an official implementation of legislation encouraging White Australia in the constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia ended the Islanders' employment. Subsequently, they were repatriated to their islands of origin (Tavan 2005: 8). Appearing to be based on humanitarian reasons, in truth these events unfolded due to a complicated network of nationalist, cultural and, first of all, racist reasons – all rooted in the ideology of White Australia and the desire to create a racially homogeneous society.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the assumed superiority of the "white race" was increasingly challenged (Lake 2004: 41–44). This was allegedly made all the weightier by Australia's solitary situation, as Charles Henry Pearson (1894) famously claimed. Alarmist studies cautioned against the so-called "yellow peril", which was also addressed in a popular genre of the time: the so-called invasion novel (Affeldt 2011; Walker 1999). In addition to the political and scientific discourse of the day, these dire literary predictions brought scare stories about the purportedly imminent "swamping" by "yellow hordes" into every Australian household.

Australia was culturally close to Europe. At the same time, it was geographically isolated in the immediate vicinity of Asian countries, which were considered to be culturally distant. This intensified fears of hostile take-overs by foreign powers. It was in particular the thinly populated areas of Australia's northern coasts that were thought to be the stepping stones for those deemed "racial Others" – i.e., initially Chinese and in the early decades of the twentieth century Japanese potential invaders.

Against this backdrop, the Queensland sugar industry was considered an important factor of population policy and the sole remedy to the so-called "empty North" (MacIntyre 1920) as a heightened engagement of Europeans in the cane fields would encourage white settlement in these regions. However, in view of the sugar capitalists' unwillingness to part with their profitable "black workforce", it was only by means of legislation prohibiting the recruitment of non-white cane workers that the sugar industry could eventually be turned into a "white man's industry" (van de Velde 1901: 12).

The cover of the labour movement's magazine *The Worker* (1897) shows a cartoon with the caption "The real reason why Queensland was not allowed to take part in the Federal Convention" (Fig. 1). It depicts the anthropomorphized and feminized

Fig. 1. "The real reason why Queensland was not allowed to take part in the Federal Convention", Cover of *The Worker*, 24.7.1897

Australian colonies of the time. All of them bear distinctly European facial features, hold hands and form a circle. They beckon Queensland to join them, but *she* is held back by a man, nominally identified and racialized as a "kanaka". The cartoon relates to the demand to abolish the Pacific Island labour trade expressed by the other colonies and depicts Queensland's continued use of "black labour" as a hindrance to Federation.

Underhandedly, it provides a broader perspective through its gendering of the protagonists. With Queensland portrayed as a white, innocent girl and the perpetrator as a black and brutish man, allusions are made to both miscegenation and the danger "black labour" posed for white women – and thus alluded to the relations between gender and nation (Yuval-Davis 2008). This was a tocsin, warning of the mere presence of "racial Others" in the colony and their often voiced ostensibly detrimental effects on the (white) labour market, i.e., undercutting by the black competition. Moreover, this cartoon explicitly points out the need for immediate action on behalf of securing the desired racially homogeneous society.

With regard to the steps that were necessary to reconstruct the sugar industry as one deemed suitable for White Australia, two transformations took place after the Federation of Australia in 1901.

The *first*, the demographic transformation, consisted of the deportation of the South Sea Islanders, who had significantly contributed to the establishment of the Queensland sugar industry to their home islands. This was regulated by the Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901 and was ideologically justified not least by biologistic and culturalistic discrimination against the South Sea Islanders (Engerman 2000: 483) which, *inter alia*, depicted them as eugenic danger and uncivilized cannibals and declared Queensland a literal "black spot on the map of White Australia" (Lepherd 1901).

The *second*, the ideological transformation, effectively took place after this racist "refinement" of the sugar industry and concerned social changes in the work and living conditions of the sugar workers, urged by the labour movement. But its roots were laid well before Federation. Already during the 1890s, the employment of non-European workers in the northern part of the continent had been a thorn in the side of the trade unions. They had blamed the capitalists for being interested in nothing but their own profit, and especially for pursuing its maximisation to the detriment of both the white worker and the white nation (McMullin 1991: 46–47).

Another cartoon from *The Worker* (1892, Fig. 2), captioned "The Bushman's Future" shows the perceived labour situation in Queensland. It is depicted as a social landscape in which all available jobs are already occupied by either the South Sea Islanders (as cane cutters) or the Chinese (as miners). The depicted white swagman – as a stand-in for all white, predominantly British, men seeking work beyond urban boundaries – is further discouraged from applying as shearer or station hand, since all these jobs are already taken by non-European labourers. With the employers having renounced the "white alliance" founded on "race", which otherwise overrode class distinction, the bushman now has to face his inevitable yet undeserved fate: unemployment. The remedy to this is the racist cleansing of the labour market and, ideally, of the whole Australian society.

Fig. 2: "The Bushman's Future"
Cover of *The Worker*, 14.5.1892

Politically, this found expression in the Labor Party's propaganda. Here, for instance in "A White Australia", another cover cartoon by *The Worker* (1900, Fig. 3), at a time when the Party made the "racial purification" of Australia part of their programme. Standing on a plank labelled "federal platform", the "white worker" is about to cleanse Australia using "white labour". That its whiteness has to emanate from Queensland (i.e., the "whitening" of the sugar industry) is emphasized by the already shining north-eastern area of the depicted continent.

The first transformation – the repatriation of the South Sea Islanders – eventually generated demand for European workers. However, the ideological connection of sugar cane and unfree labour (even slavery) was still too strong and the recruitment of Europeans remained low.

The cited *Worker* article offers a glimpse at the social transformation that was about to intensify in the subsequent years. This pertained especially to the improvement of working conditions in order to ultimately sever the connections between

Fig. 3: "A White Australia"
Cover of *The Worker*, 27.1.1900

sugar cane cultivation and forced labour. "[T]he employees of 'white' sugar cane farmers should receive fair rates of remuneration for their labor", the article claimed (1909: 7). "Fair" has several connotations. Contemporarily, besides *beautiful* and just the crucial one was *white* (Kelen 2005: 218). Taken this into consideration, the labour movement was after "white wages for white workers"

Over the following years, extensive social conflicts in the sugar industry ensued, encouraged by the trade unions, which eventually peaked in the Sugar Strike of 1911 (Armstrong 1983). These conflicts show explicitly how the struggle for *white wages* and the striving for a *white nation* coincided. It was only by asserting their whiteness that the European cane cutters eventually succeeded in their fight for improved working conditions. This achievement was, of course, celebrated by *The Worker* (1911). Its cartoon "Strength United is Stronger" lauds the unions' united actions against employers and/or capitalists by depicting an anthropomorphized Solidarity, approvingly patting a sugar worker's back (Fig. 4). In the accompanying

editorial article, the victorious resistance against the "bitter servitude" associated with the "sweetening product" is taken as proof for a politically organized "spirit of mateship" (*The Worker* 1911: 6).

Fig. 4: "Strength United is Stronger"
Cover of *The Worker,* 19.8.1911

After the transformation of the sugar industry the notion of White Sugar was soon adopted by the sugar growers. They tied in with the racist ideology and emphasized the importance of their industry for White Australia by applying then already firmly established tropes of the "empty North" and underlying danger of invasion by non-European powers. They adopted these claims as part of their pro-White Sugar advertisements (Fig. 5).

In the early twentieth century, "white sugar" had become a ubiquitous yet provocative term. It did not aim at the chemical whiteness of sugar but explicitly addressed its social dimension. Other than British consumers, who profited from the forced labour of African sugar cane workers in the Caribbean, Australian commodity racism found expression in the "purification" of the Queensland sugar industry

Fig. 5: Advertisement by the Sugar Growers of Australia
The Examiner, 13.4.1932

from "cheap labour" in order to reap the ideological benefit of a *doubly white sugar*, not only refined white but also produced white.

White Sugar is ideologically located in the context of both White Australia and the class struggle in the cane fields. Furthermore, it comprises the whole thematic field of consumption. In the light of the plentiful usage of sugar despite its high price, this consumption did not remain without public discussion (Smart 2006: 24) and, as political consumerism, it translated politics and theories of white supremacy into every actions of the (white) Australian population (Affeldt 2018).

Thence, White Sugar refers to several important dimensions: labour policy, population policy and consumption policy. In terms of *labour policy*, the white workers fought for improved working conditions within an economy reminiscent of traditional (American) plantation societies. The issue not only addressed relations between the working and the property-owning class but also the relationship between differently racialized parts of the working class. In terms of *population policy*, the local economic questions were connected to national political questions. The sugar industry had become the touchstone of geopolitical claims and eugenic fears: Could white labour permanently cultivate the tropical part of the continent and at the same time reproduce itself in an extent, sufficient to legitimate the occupation of the northern shores once and for all? In terms of *consumption policy*, the issue was, at first sight, about industrial subsidies and costs, but at the core the concern was the racist societalisation of sugar consumers.

Though by this, White Sugar became the symbol of White Australia and "racial purity", the industry's special position had to be constantly legitimated. The embargo of foreign sugar to safeguard the Australian sugar against competition and the resulting price increase for Australian cane sugar – paid by all Australians – necessitated the moral support by the whole population.

This support was solicited, firstly, by specific advertisement campaigns on behalf of the Queensland sugar industry, which emphasized its defence potential. Secondly, the newspapers of the time also underlined the industry's unique feature of being a completely white endeavour: "Australia is the only country in the world where cane sugar is produced by white labor" (*Cairns Post* 1922: 4) and "Australians [are] prepared to pay for sugar produced by white labor rather than obtain cheaper sugar produced by black labor" (*The Recorder* 1930: 1). Another paper (*The Bundaberg Mail and Burnett Advertiser* 1912: 4) asked the rather rhetorical question: "is a 'White Australia' not worth paying for?", adding that

> The man who says it is not [sic] is either a fool, a lunatic, or a traitor to his country. Everybody recognises the importance of North Queensland being settled by a virile, prosperous and progressive white race. And what industry can take the place of sugar? None.

In the interplay of White Sugar and White Australia, racism was therefore not merely a contaminating attachment of the struggle between capital and labour, which was in essence aimed at improving the working and living conditions for those employed in the Queensland sugar industry. This social conflict was conducted in fundamentally racialized terms and was, at the same time, crucial to the survival of a nation that was idealized as being purely white and British.

The complex entanglement involving, *inter alia*, nationalist ideology, white culture and interests of the labour movement is put in a nutshell by an advertisement that combines the discursive threats and social cohesion based on *commodity racism* this article has analysed.

The advert (Fig. 6) was financed by the sugar industry and was published as full-page information in all major Australian newspapers in October 1930. It is divided into two parts: an image section and a text body. The latter contains a key phrase that conjures a unity between social partners – it proclaims the importance of the sugar workers for the survival of the nation: "At present our only bulwark is provided by the stalwart Sugar Workers in Queensland".

The image section illustrates the dangers that needed to be averted: White Australia is located in a dark ocean whose menace is additionally emphasized by the expression "The Rising Tide of Colour". This is the title of one (Stoddard 1920) of the many alarmist works, predicting the "coloured tides" as threat to the "white world" after the turn of the twentieth century. That East Asia played a particularly important part is here visually emphasized by the depiction of a physiognomically stereotypical moon. The latter sets in motion the "coloured tide", while the Australian society is unaware of the approaching enemies. Only the continued support of the Australian sugar industry safeguards the continent against the imminent hostile take-over. The last phrase of the advertisement therefore addressed those in whose hands the industry's fate lay – the sugar consumers – and requested them to "Think the Matter out".

In this context, the several discursive threads brought together in this advert granted freedom of thought only at first sight. The alleged overpopulation of the Asian neighbouring countries, the again and again emphasized endangered situation of the "empty North" and, not least, dystopian scenarios of land-taking "yellow hordes" allowed for only *one* conclusion. In this attitude the Australian consumers

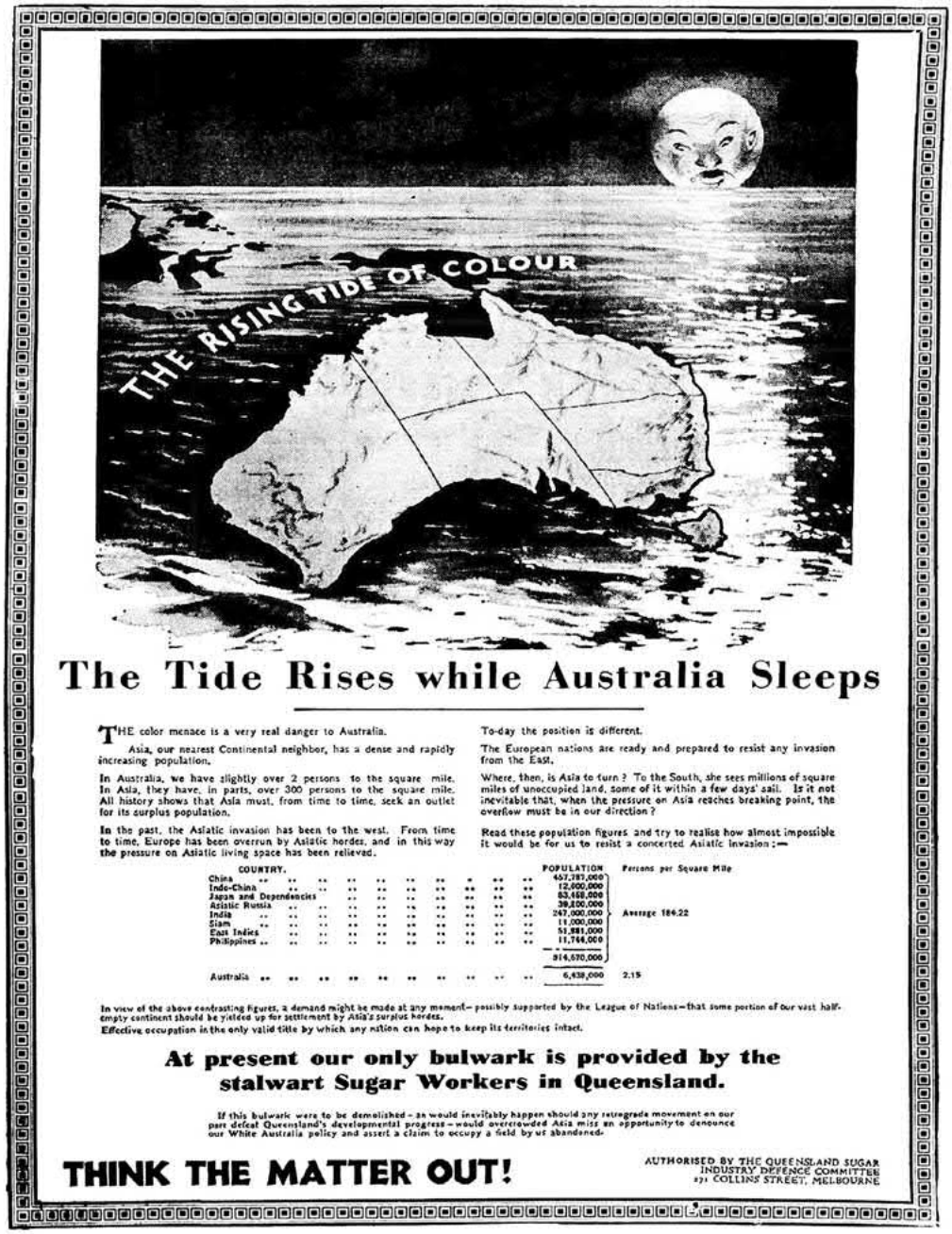

Fig. 6: "The Rising Tide of Colour"
The Advertiser, 18.10.1930

were, beyond any doubt and conflict, supported by their politicians. This was most poignantly phrased by the Prime Minister William Hughes in 1922, who explained to the Australian population that

> [Y]ou cannot have a White Australia in this country unless you are prepared to pay for it. One of the ways in which we can pay for a White Australia is to support the sugar industry of Queensland. (*The Argus* 1922: 29)

Such a solicitation from the highest authority and its appeal directed at the moral duty of every (white) Australian did not go unheeded. The governmental subsidies of the industry were financed by a system of bounties, rebates and excises and could only be implemented in connection with an embargo of all overseas sugar. Nonetheless, instead of refraining from buying the expensive sugar, or reducing in protest

its use to the bare minimum, the Australians had a significantly high per capita consumption and were for many years during the twentieth century even leading the global statistics (Affeldt 2014: 373, 514; Griggs 1999: 74).

The willingness to support White Sugar is the practical implementation of the theories of commodity racism, which had its origins, *inter alia*, on world fairs and in advertisements of British consumer society. These Western concepts were translocated to Australia. In the case of White Sugar, they were then shaped by the local politics of the day. Commonly, commodity racism referred to notions of white supremacy and was based on the exploitation of those deemed "racial Others". In Australia, however, attention was drawn to the jeopardizing and vulnerability of white supremacy in a geographically and culturally particular society. Additionally, this was embedded in an omnipresent discourse on whiteness as a crucial part of the Australian identity. In the context of White Sugar, expulsion of "coloured labour" was put above its exploitation. Moreover, beyond socio-economic considerations, the racist processes that drove forward the transformation of the Queensland sugar industry – making "black" sugar "white" – tied in neatly with broader ideals of making and keeping Australia "white".

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