FORUM

The Sydney riots

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Abstract: This article describes the recent Sydney riots and the commentary surrounding them. The author demonstrates how, through processes of 'analytical ethnic cleansing', 'ethnic homogenization and specification', and 'blame displacement', the Lebanese Muslim community, a target of the initial rioters, came to be victimized in commentary on the riots. While the riots may not have been particularly significant in themselves, the commentary surrounding them provides an important window onto the state of cultural politics in Australia at a specific juncture in time when multi-culturalism is simultaneously hegemonic but subject to attack from Australia's ruling federal political regime. The author claims, moreover, that the victimization of Lebanese Muslims is indicative of a particular current process in which a discourse of multi-culturalism, engendered largely by its liberal advocates and drawing on the scholarly works of anthropologists and other social scientists, is utilized to undermine multi-culturalism as a form of social policy and organization.

Keywords: Australia, multi-culturalism, riots

Trouble in the suburbs

On Sunday 11 December 2005, a balmy early summer morning, some five thousand 'locals' gathered in Cronulla, a beachside suburb of Sydney.¹ Revelers indulged in those most iconic of Australian national pastimes, eating barbecued food and drinking beer at that most nationally iconic of settings, the beach (Pilger 1989). Celebratory waving of flags in time to collective renditions of the national anthem and amplified Aussie rock classics, including, of course, the ubiquitous "I come from the land down under," might have seemed entirely appropriate. Australia was, after-all, basking in the glory of yet

another sporting triumph, the national team's recent qualification for the football 2006 World Cup finals for the first time in thirty-two years.

However, the gathering also had a territorial dimension. Messages on placards and painted bodies proclaimed the aim of "reclaiming the beach." Turf wars between Sydney beachsiders and pleasure-seeking visitors from the city's landlocked suburbs have had a *longue durée*. Like the English seaside riots that Stanley Cohen documented in formulating his notion of 'moral panics' (1972), such clashes have always had a significant youth sub-cultural dimension, as peroxide blonde 'Surfies' battled a changing array of quiffed 'Bodgies', long-haired 'Rockers', and

mullet-bearing ‘Sharpies’ through the 1950s, 60s, and 70s respectively. They have also always had significant local and class dimensions. Cronulla forms part of the larger area of Sutherland Shire, known by many Sydney-siders simply as ‘The Shire’, an area regarded as separate and distinctive, both in terms of landscape and culture, in the context of greater-Sydney. Moreover, the division between the affluent coastal south of the city, of which the Shire is a part, and its solidly working-class southwest is a historic social fracture. These sub-cultural, local, and class tinged geographical divisions have also developed an ethnic dimension. In contrast to most of multicultural Sydney, Cronulla is, as James Jupp, Professor and Director of the Centre for Immigration and Multicultural Studies at the Australian National University, describes it a ‘white ghetto’ (*The Australian*, 13 December 2005: 11). Its residents are largely Australian-born, with Australian parents of British and Irish origin, and the greater part of its immigrant population is from Britain and New Zealand.

The ethnicization of territoriality at Cronulla on 11 December was evident in the placards and painted bodies. Some, such as the sign displayed by the organizer of a large ‘sausage sizzle’ that advertised “Free Snags—No Tabuli” suggested little more than a celebration of a beleaguered Anglo-Celtic Australian culture. Others posited legitimizing grounds for ethnic territoriality—“We were born here. You flew here!” Still others were calls to action—“Reclaim the beach. Wog and Leb bashing day.” Fuelled by the nationalistic fervor, the alcohol, a dose of heatstroke and, to an extent at least, by the presence of a smattering of small right-wing extremist groups (some of whom, as groups of this kind tend to do, worked hard after the event to claim the subsequent riot as part of their master plan) the gathering became a mob that turned on and ‘bashed’ ‘visitors’, particularly those of ‘Middle-Eastern’ appearance.

In the days that followed ‘Nulla’², violence spread to other parts of the city. There were reports of reprisal and counter-reprisal attacks on people and property by young men of Middle-Eastern and Caucasian appearance, roaming

gangs, the firing of shots, the throwing of Molotov cocktails, and acts of symbolic violence, including the ripping off of headscarves from Muslim women. In one of the most bewildering events, shots were fired and fire bombs hurled at church property in suburban Sydney. One of several conflicting interpretations has it that this was a violent attempt to shame Sydney’s Lebanese Christian community into supporting Lebanese Muslims, one amongst several targets of the Cronulla mob.

Based on fears that the troubles might stoke Islamic extremism, might spread to other areas and, with reports of busloads of would-be rioters heading in for the following weekend, might intensify in Sydney itself, the response of the state was draconian. Scores of people were arrested for a range of misdemeanors from attempted murder to possession of weapons—one young man was jailed for possession of a tree branch. The numbers of police on patrol in potential hot-spots was trebled and the Parliament of New South Wales was specially recalled from summer recess to enact a range of measures. These included removal of the right to bail for those accused of rioting and a dramatic increase in the penalty for rioting. A host of new police powers were enacted, including the right to establish ‘lockdown zones’ in which people can be stopped and searched, and the power to confiscate vehicles and mobile phones, important technologies of mobilization in the rioters’ armory. Meanwhile, in what seemed like either an act of supreme denial of the events’ significance, prophetic wisdom about their lasting insignificance or, as one colleague assures me, a politically astute tapping into a widespread desire amongst Australians to take it easy and forget rather than confront problems, the Australian prime minister ended the week by instructing the nation to “have Christmas and celebrate the fact that this is still the greatest country in the world.”

(Un)Australian ways: Peoples and policies

The responses of commentators, politicians, police, community leaders, academics, and colum-

nists, in the days following Nulla had a number of characteristics. An initial knee-jerk response was to condemn the behavior of rioters as being un-Australian. The usual multi-vocality of national identity is, it would appear, multiplied in the migrant nation that is Australia, consisting of national archetypes that for some can be traced to the characteristics of early Anglo-Saxon and Irish bush settlers (Ward 1958) and for others to the ever-changing cultural accommodations required to live peacefully in a multi-cultural society. The breadth of this multi-vocality is demonstrated nicely by the idea of 'a fair go'. The idea, which conveys a kind of 'natural' egalitarianism (see also Kapferer 1988) that stood in sharp contrast to the natural hierarchism and learned egalitarianism of Australia's colonial overseer, Great Britain, might once have spoken of class and the right of bush workers to demand fair pay from the 'squatocracy', but now can be used to speak about the rights of ethnic minorities. The idea was used frequently in condemning the inappropriateness of the Cronulla mob's territoriality and, indeed, in some extreme iterations to present not only the mob, but also the majority Anglo-Celtic population as essentially un-Australian. As Lebanese community youth leader, Fadhi Rahman, put it, "this is not the Australian way ... this shows you the Australian people are not ready to give us a fair go" (*The Australian*, 12 December 2005: 6).

Having said this, one gets the sense that what this multi-vocality gives on to and what becomes publicly apparent through events such as the Sydney riots is the increasing nebulousness of a unitary national identity. As such, Australianess tends to be articulated in terms of what it is not, un-Australianess, and that can be whatever you want it to be—rioting (though I will say more about this later), wearing the veil, or standing on one's head whilst eating ice cream.

Knee-jerk reactions were then followed by analysis of the political, economic, social, and cultural causes of the rioters' actions. In the eyes of many commentators the mob may have been wrong, but not dangerously wrong. In light of the prime minister's statement that he did not "accept there is an underlying racism in this

country," some of the most powerful commentators who had initially hinted that the behavior of the mob might have been indicative of an incipient racism amongst Australia's Anglo-Celtic majority were quick to downgrade their subsequent remarks. For example, New South Wales Premier Morris Iemma's early generalizing characterization of the behavior of the mob as 'the ugly face of racism' was replaced by remarks about the specific culpability of a small group of right-wing activists. Moreover, in many respects the mob's behavior, though misguided, was seen as understandable. It reflected fears shared by many Australians, both Anglo-Celtic and other, about destabilization of the 'Australian way of life' wrought by immigration, the threat of terror, and 'home grown' terror in particular. It was no coincidence, so the local Liberal Party member of Parliament argued that "the flash-point for Sunday morning's riot was alongside the memorial on the beach to the local victims of the Bali bombing" (*The Australian*, 13 December 2005: 5). Such fears had, the commentators rightly point out, been inflamed by international and national political initiatives, including 'the war on terror', the rise of the ultra right-wing One Nation Party, and the adoption of its race-based populism by mainstream political parties through a range of policy measures including, most notoriously, the 'Pacific Solution' and the domestic detention of immigrants.

Crucially, these fears, representationally embodied in the object of the immigrant, and in particular Middle-Eastern and Muslim people, have been fueled, commentators pointed out, by a number of high-profile criminal cases such as a recent spree of rapes carried out by a gang of young Lebanese men in suburban Sydney. Indeed, the initial gathering at Cronulla was, in part, a response to an attack on a couple of beach lifeguards, another Australian icon, by a group of young men of Middle-Eastern descent. Clearly, many commentators seemed to imply, it was almost certainly the case that the targets of the mob, and their type in general, had provoked their own victimization through engaging in thoroughly un-Australian and anti-social forms of behavior, especially when visiting the beach.

Chief amongst these is a Neanderthal attitude to women. As one commentator pointed out, “our women have been told they’re going to be raped because they’re wearing bikinis. These people try to stop our way of life” (*The Australian*, 12 December 2005: 6). Less seriously, the commentators refer to the loutish behavior and tacky aesthetics, or ‘bling’, of young men of Middle-Eastern descent. For example, one sympathetic commentator observes that many local Muslim youths take their cultural cues from American rap culture—“you see hotted up cars, big jewellery, the toughness, the talking and the haircuts ... they’re relating to being victimized just like the Black in American society” (*The Australian*, 14 December 2005: 11).

The targets of the Cronulla mob, and those who engaged in retaliatory action were a fairly diverse group—inter-suburb visitors, immigrants, ‘Wogs’ (a pejorative term for people of Southern European descent), Middle-Eastern people, and Lebanese (‘Lebs’) in particular. However, within days of the riot the spotlight of concern honed in on Lebanese Muslims, and media called upon the services of academics to explain why they are and are seen to be a problem community. Lebanese migrants, initially largely Maronites and Christians and then, since the onset of civil war in 1975, largely Muslims, have been coming to Australia for more than one hundred years. Most accounts present the Lebanese Muslims as having assimilated comparatively badly. Some emphasize the historico-structural causes of inadequate assimilation, pointing to the fact that they arrived at the time of the collapse of manufacturing in Australia. As Michael Humphrey, Professor of Sociology at the University of Sydney points out, initial high levels of unemployment amongst Lebanese Muslims gave on to low levels of educational attainment and employability amongst subsequent generations (*The Australian*, 14 December 2005: 11) such that the Lebanese Muslims have, according to James Jupp, been “left behind compared with other groups such as the Chinese, Vietnamese, Greeks and Jews” and face “a classical ghetto situation” (*ibid.*).

Conversely, however, a greater array of commentary considers the culture of Lebanese Mus-

lims. Here, so the story goes, is a particularly dysfunctional community. Nowhere, apparently, is that dysfunctionality more evident than in the family and its reproduction of young men. Many such young men are, apparently, bearers of an Islamic intolerance of liberal Australian ways, particularly toward bodily displays (Editorial, *The Australian*, 14 December 2005: 11). Likewise, many have a sense of being entitled “to unearned respect from all others, especially women” (Editorial, *The Australian*, 15 December 2005: 13), and tend to be “aggressive and violent” (Editorial, *The Australian*, 14 December 2005: 11). These forms of behavior and outlook result, according to several accounts, from the fact that there are different rules for girls and for boys, especially when it comes to discipline (see, e.g., Jamal and Chandab 2005). Most worryingly, according to several commentators, the prospects for improvement are bleak, for, as its comparatively low levels of out-marriage (see Birrell and Healy 2000) indicate, the Lebanese Muslim community is unusually insular.

Discussion of the people involved in the rioting was accompanied by discussion of the policy-related causes of the riots. Limited discussion of contributory factors such as Australia’s role in the international war on terror, new domestic anti-terrorism measures, and the quality of policing was, however overwhelmed by debate about immigration policies (that is, the ones that brought immigrants here recently and not penal settlement and the ‘ten pound Pom’ policies that brought the Anglo-Celts) and, above all, multiculturalism. Initiated thirty years previously, initially in the form of the Whitlam government’s anti-discrimination laws, multi-culturalism, a range of measures too voluminous to document here (see Jupp 1989) remains a cornerstone, albeit crumbling, of domestic policy. By way of a hugely simplified thumbnail sketch of the debate one can say that the kind of conflict at heart of the Sydney riots is seen by many as a result of either multi-culturalism’s inadequate or excessive implementation. For example, a member of the former camp, James Jupp, argues that official multi-culturalism has been ‘too self-congratulatory’, involving an incessant celebration of the won-

ders of different cultures coming together without significant recognition of inter-ethnic inequalities (*The Australian*, 14 December 2005). At another level, he points to an unfortunate waning of multi-culturalism in official politics, as its implementation is devolved from federal to state governments. This is hardly surprising, since one of its most fierce foes is the prime minister himself. It was his government that initiated the 'One Australia' policy, that calls for the promotion of a unitary Australian national identity and, in contrast to multi-culturalism's celebration of diversity, an emphasis on assimilation.

Articulation of the critique of multi-culturalism in relation to the Sydney riots appeared to stress two things. On the one hand, multi-culturalism highlights ethnic differences and in some respects creates them where they barely exist. The central mechanisms for this are welfare and housing policy and their production of ethnic ghettos. And, according to some extreme accounts, the logic driving it is political interest. For example, that most provocative of Australian right-wing academics, Keith Windshuttle, suggests that the Labor Party intentionally adopted a policy of geographical clustering, whereby by 2001, 73 percent of all Sydney's Lebanese lived in the western and southwestern suburbs, in order to build a non-English-speaking constituency for the party (*The Australian*, 16 December 2005). On the other hand, it fosters resentment amongst Australia's white Anglo-Celtic majority. This is not just an outcome of special treatment accorded to ethnic groups. Apparently also, multi-culturalism encourages a belief that all cultures are worthy of respect except Australia's. This touches a raw post-colonial nerve for, as Clarke succinctly puts it, "such an outlook amounted to a new version of the cultural cringe that had been characteristic of Australians when they encountered the social and cultural pretensions of the English in earlier years" (2003: 334f.). However, things are not as simple as this. For, as I show in the concluding part of this article, whilst there may be a fundamental divide between advocates for and critics of multi-culturalism in terms of its inadequate or excessive implementation respectively, the Sydney riots highlight the para-

sitic nature of the critique of multi-culturalism. Its hegemonic position within Australian politics having more or less been attained, multi-culturalism's detractors increasingly adopt its content in their constitution of its critique.

The significance of the Sydney riots

Shortly after the initial riot on Cronulla beach, television news dedicated large chunks of its time to global coverage of the events—reportage of the reportage. One could not help but notice the enigmatic Mona Lisa-like expressions of the more professional anchor women. They expressed the fear that Australia's image as 'The Lucky Country', one so important to international investment and tourism, might have been shattered. However, they also perhaps conveyed a certain unwarranted cringing pride in this small nation's international recognition and, more importantly, to quote an Australian expression, that "she'll be right mate." In other words, as Prime Minister Howard might have been implying, the riots were not a particularly significant moment in the history of Australia. Perhaps he was right. If continuity can be taken as a measure of this, then he certainly was, for the disorder that followed Cronulla petered out within a matter of days. Moreover, rioting is commonplace in Australian history. The roll call of names extends well beyond the Sydney beaches turf wars—the Lambing Flat attack on Chinese in 1860, the Kalgoorlie riots of 1934 directed against southern Europeans, the Battle of Brisbane during World War II directed against US servicemen, and the Redfern and Macquarie Fields riots involving Indigenous Australians in February 2004 to name but a few. Indeed, in a lengthy piece in *Neu-Oder-Zeitung* one Karl Marx wrote on rioting in Australia as far back as 1854. The subject of his essay, the Eureka Stockade, in which gold prospectors resisted the punitive taxation regime of the colonial administration is regarded as a foundational moment in the building of the Australian nation. Wryly then, one might argue, the words of New South Wales Police Commissioner Ken Moroney that "it's not Australian to

adopt a mob mentality" (*The Australian*, 12 December 2005: 1) ring a little hollow. In reality the Cronulla rioters were indulging in a pastime as quintessentially Australian as eating barbequed prawns.³

Having said this, what is abundantly clear is that the Sydney riots and, above all, the commentary that accompanied them do, like many moral panics, provide an important window onto the state of contemporary cultural politics in Australia. In this respect, a number of key processes can be identified. The first of these is what might be termed analytical ethnic cleansing. A smattering of comments about the economic and social marginality (and the styles and tastes that they give onto) of Sydney's Middle-Eastern immigrant communities not withstanding, ethnicity came to prevail over other factors such as class, localism, youth sub-cultural attachment and, indeed, gender in accounting for the causes of the riots. To illustrate the point further, the Cronulla mob's territorial defense of the beach, a key symbol of their nation, was accompanied by statements about the protection of their women who had been threatened with violation by visitors, particularly men of Middle-Eastern descent. This linking of the national body politic and the bodies of the women of the nation is commonplace the world over (see, e.g., Sofos 1996). Thus, it was somewhat shocking to read so-called enlightened commentators taking this as a cue for investigating what they represented widely as the peculiar gender dysfunctionality of people of Middle-Eastern descent and Lebanese Muslims in particular. One cannot help but ask, since when has the abuse of women been anything other than universal? Indeed, one might add, since when has the abuse of women ('Shielas' in joky local parlance) not been an implicit component of iconic images of Australian masculinity?

A second key process involved ethnic homogenization and specification, whereby the diversity of the riotous factions was progressively representationally expunged and replaced initially by a conflict between Anglo-Celtic Australians and others and lastly by a conflict between Australians and Muslims, and Lebanese

Muslims in particular. The tale of a young male Australian Serbian nationalist football hooligan that I encountered in the course of fieldwork, and that coincidentally highlights the liminality of belonging amongst non-Anglo-Celtic Australians, is humorously illustrative. He drove to Sydney to "get some action," all the way listening to the radio so that he might discover where the next conflagration was to take place. However, the reportage had another effect. On leaving Melbourne's city limits he knew that his opponents were 'Anglos', who had called for the bashing of Wogs like himself. But, by the time he got to Sydney he had reached the contradictory conclusion that his opponents were the Anglos' victims, and his peoples' historic enemy, the 'Turks' (Muslims). Confused, he did what he knows best, picking a fight with some Croatian boys at a Sydney football club.

Thirdly, as I have tried to demonstrate, a further key process involved the progressive displacement of blame for the riots from the Cronulla mob to their targets. For the time being at least let us leave aside the fact that this process of displacement undermined the potential for critical scrutiny of dominant Anglo-Celtic Australianess, a culture which, as the premier of New South Wales seemed to hint, may have aggressively xenophobic dimensions. Simply, we can say that putting the three processes of analytical ethnic cleansing, ethnic homogenization and specification, and the progressive displacement of the blame to the mob's targets together, what happened in the majority of commentary on the Sydney riots was a progressive and highly focused victimization of one particular ethnic group, Lebanese Muslims. Why did this happen? The clues, I would argue, lie in the status of multi-culturalism within Australian domestic political debate.

Simply, Australian multi-culturalism is the idea that no single ethnic, racial, or religious group may claim to be Australian to the exclusion of others. In *White nation: Fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society* (1998) Ghassan Hage concluded that the tolerance that lies at the heart of multi-culturalism is, however, a central means by which multi-culturalism becomes a new way in which the

white Anglo-Celtic majority maintains control over the national space in this context of mass immigration. Power derives from the ability to say welcome to my country, to be tolerant. However, of course, tolerance itself derives from the latent capacity, a capacity held by the white Anglo-Celtic majority, to be intolerant. In many respects Hage's brilliant book is directed at a liberal political elite, who had embraced immigration and multi-culturalism, and were transcendent at the time of writing. That liberal elite, whose standard-bearer was Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating,³ has been overtaken at least at the level of federal politics by a conservative administration led by the Liberal Party and its agenda of race-based populism.

Having said this, it is clear that Hage's analysis, his highlighting of the centrality of multi-culturalism to Anglo-Celtic domination, stands the test of time and the changing of political regimes. What discussion of the Sydney riots demonstrates is the dialectical status of multi-culturalism in contemporary Australian politics. The conservative political administration, and its many sympathetic commentators, fear multi-culturalism for being a means of legitimizing further mass immigration, a catalyst of inter-ethnic tension and resentment amongst the Anglo-Celtic majority, and route to undermining a unitary Australian identity, 'One Australia'. All these elements were implicit in discussion of the Sydney riots. However, by drawing upon the works and ideas of liberal advocates of multi-culturalism, including the many scholarly (often anthropological) studies of Australia's ethnic communities, they also co-opt multi-culturalist discourse in their endeavor to undermine it as a social policy and mode of social organization.

Multi-culturalism's relativistic and culturalist dimensions are particularly significant in this respect. In her critical analysis of 'cultural defense' Kristin Koptiuch persuasively highlights the regeneration of colonialist depictions of ethnic cultures that emerge within multi-culturalist discourses (1996). In their most extreme forms these depictions present ethnic cultural forms as resistant to the exigencies of human agency and change. A more sophisticated version of this

characterizes the debate on the Sydney riots—the practices of some ethnic groups, borne more of culture than historico-cultural circumstance, are rendered unchanging by their insular social practices. The Sydney riots were presented as indicative of the dangers of mass migration and multi-culturalism. However, to be persuasive those dangers needed an embodied form. Lebanese Muslims, after the data provided by often sympathetic cultural analysts was given the conservative's spin, provided that body. Here, according to many commentators was an ethnic community whose dysfunctional cultural practices, their sexism, and other illiberality, are rendered unchanging due to familial socialization and marital practices.

This account of Lebanese Muslims plays nicely with ostensibly contradictory discourses of exclusion articulated by the conservatives. In 'One Australia' the Lebanese Muslims become essentially un-assimilable. (As an aside, I would argue that the nebulousness of Australian national identity wrought by awareness of its multi-voice accentuates such un-assimilability, for assimilation is represented as a responsibility of the immigrant, and how can one assimilate to that which is not known?) Conversely, the latter multi-culturalism, when articulated by the conservatives at least, bears resemblances to Pim Fortuyn's liberal intolerance or, to put it another way, intolerance of intolerance, in the Netherlands.

It is not hard to speculate on the outcomes of these discourses of exclusion. Certainly, in the era of the 'war on terror' and the 'home grown terrorist' one cannot discount the possibility of a return to an old-style 'White Australia' approach of highly targeted immigration in which Islamic people are regarded as the most undesirable. Given this, whilst it is clear that the conservative's undermining of multi-culturalism as a form of social policy and organization is increasingly dependent on, and therefore sustaining of, the discourse of multi-culturalism, the words of that most celebrated writer on Australia seem unusually prophetic. The central significance of the Sydney riots is, I would argue, as a moment marking the way in which multi-culturalism sows 'the seeds of its own downfall'.

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Notes

1. This article quotes extensively from *The Australian*. However, it is based on readings of *The Australian*, *The Age*, and *The Sydney Morning Herald* newspapers and viewing of SBS, Channel 7, Channel 9, Channel 10, and ABC television news broadcasts between 12 and 24 December 2005. I would also like to thank Ben Killingworth, Anthony Marcus, and Buck Rosenberg for their insightful comments.
2. Reflecting a common practice of abbreviation in Australia (e.g., 'this arvo' for this afternoon) the initial Cronulla riot came to be known as 'Nulla' by many of the participants at least.
3. As an ironic aside, it is worth mentioning that the Eurekaites were a multi-ethnic group whose second in command was an Italian firebrand and first victim of arrest a black New Yorker. Thus, in brandishing the flag of the Eureka Stockade the largely Anglo-Celtic Cronulla mob were, arguably, holding up one of Australia's first key symbols of multi-culturalism.
4. It should be noted, however, that the mandatory detention of all unlawful arrivals was initially enacted by the Keating Government in the Migration Reform Act of 1992.

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