An email from the ether: after the Cronulla events

David Burchell

David Burchell muses on the incapacity of critical intellectuals to consider the riots and the revenge attacks which followed them in the same light, as an instance of intercommunal strife.

Late last year, as the wave of ethnically-inspired violence and civil unrest across southern Sydney was abating, I received an invitation via my work email to a Rally Against Racism in the city's Town Hall Square. On the face of it the invitation seemed entirely laudable, or at least unexceptionable. 'It's time for ALL Australians to Unite Against Racism!', ran the sub-head. And the email enjoined me to 'send the strongest possible message to the rest of Australia and to the rest of the world that those 5,000 people who rioted at Cronulla do not speak for us'.

Nevertheless, as I pondered upon it, it occurred to me that there was something odd, both about the email's message and its timing. It was true that the opening round in the erupting tensions across the city had been the alcohol-fuelled local 'rally' in Cronulla which had led to individuals of even vaguely Lebanese appearance being harassed and assaulted across the Sutherland Shire – several having to be rescued and squirreled away in 'safe houses' by police. And yet of course this first round had been followed by a series of counter-punches – a wave of equally damaging and violent revenge attacks over successive nights, which also involved numerous assaults, as well as dozens of damaged cars and four damaged churches and church halls.

Further, the original 'rally' had been organised in what was believed to be retribution for the behaviour of groups of young men from south-west Sydney on the beaches of the area over a period of time – behaviour that had culminated in the apparently motiveless assault of a surf lifeguard. On the face of it, then, southern Sydney had endured the outbreak of a pent-up spasm of inter-gang or even inter-communal violence, rather than an almost random irruption of racism against ethnic minorities.

Indeed, even as my email's author pressed the fateful 'send' button, local community leaders in southern and south-west Sydney were getting together in an effort to reconcile their communities in a spirit of peace and fellow-citizenship, on the basis that all the acts of violence were equally abhorrent, regardless of their ethnic targets. Why, when reconciliation seemed the order of the day, were so many well-meaning people determined to instead pursue a path of repudiation and even exorcism?

Even in its greatest and grandest moments (like the civil rights movement in the US, for instance) that emotional-political conjoint known as anti-racism is a complex beast. Unlikely offspring of a twentieth-century Marxist father and a nineteenth-century Christian mother, anti-racism is driven at once by a desire to atone for sin, and to combat what is taken to be a ruling-class agenda to foster racist tendencies in order to divide the populace and distract them from the main enemy. And so anti-racist campaigns often have a dual character – they're part calls to arms, part acts of emotional severance and repudiation. Two banners fly side by side, as it were – 'Unite against the Common Enemy' and 'Not in My Name'. Again, since the dual heritages of anti-racism are both caught up in the histories of empire and colonialism, there is an almost overwhelming instinct to view racist attitudes as the tools of dominant ethnic groups – seen as historic inheritors of the colonialist mission.

This heritage and these instincts no doubt explained some of the tone and sentiment of my email – and of numerous academic and journalistic forays into the Cronulla events since. And yet – or so it struck me – there was more 'happening'

in the email than could be explained by ideological heritage alone. All Australians were to reject racism, it told me. And yet the only racism mentioned was that of a particular (and in significant respects local) community – a community which could perhaps be taken as belonging to the 'dominant' majority, it's true, but still not one with any serious claim to represent 'Australians' as a whole.

Again, those rejecting racism were enjoined to do so in order to show that 'those 5,000 people who rioted at Cronulla do not speak for us'. And so – by a series of little logical leaps so complicated that my head was beginning to swim – the 'us' being enjoined here started to look very much like an ethnically-specific us, an 'us' of 'Anglo-Australians' standing up against a specific Anglo-Australian racism, in order to remove it from 'our' midst.

But why the complicated indirectness here? Why not just exhort 'Anglo-Australians' of goodwill to stand up against the trouble-makers in their midst, and engage in an inter-community dialogue aimed at reaching reconciliation and understanding? This is exactly how inter-communal strife would be understood and managed in most other parts of the world, after all. And on the whole it was the pattern followed by the NSW Premier and Police Commissioner, community leaders and faith leaders alike. Even the local State MP, the Liberal Bruce Baird, spoke about the need to bring 'the two communities' together – as if acknowledging that this was indeed inter-communal violence based around an inter-fusion of locality and ethnicity, and not simply some irruption of an alien underclass.

In the last few years one of the most influential criticisms of 'official' Australian multiculturalism has come from the pen of Sydney academic Ghassan Hage. Personally, I'm sceptical of Hage's gloomy account of so-called official multiculturalism – an account which seems to me to presume that all efforts at creating inter-communal toleration in complex societies are doomed to reproduce the interests of a presumed dominant party. Since virtually all stable multi-faith and multi-ethnic polities have been shaped by pragmatic acts of statecraft, rather than gestures of intellectual critique, this seems to me somewhat beside the point. Ethnic and religious toleration, where it works, has never been a matter of erasing social or ethnic inequality, but of enforcing mutual regard and respect as a condition of shared citizenship under the law.

And yet in one important respect I think Hage is spot-on. Part of his case, if I'm reading it correctly, rests on the observation that Australian multiculturalism requires an imaginary division of society between 'core' and 'peripheral' ethnic groups, where it is the duty of members of the core to extend the hand of friendship and solicitation to the peripherals, in the name of peace, love and harmony. In this framework peripheral groups are defined as disadvantaged by virtue of their ethnicity. And this ethnicity, in turn, becomes the source of their cultural interest and even fascination – as members of groups whose interesting and even exotic cultures can contribute to the imagined cultural poverty of the core. (I'm hoping this way of putting it conveys Hage's intended tone.) And yet in this imaginary construction of society the core always remains a rather shadowy entity – apparently homogenous, yet socially undefined, apparently in need of cultural nutrition yet ethnically undefined.

Part of the problem with this outlook is the curious cultural and ethnic statelessness which it confers upon the 'Anglo' multicultural sympathiser. They're neither 'of' the core – since they reject it as culturally impoverished and politically dubious – nor of the periphery, since it is precisely the exoticness of its various cultures which offers cultural nutrition and sustenance. I doubt Hage is the only observer to have experienced this sense of frustration at the Archimedean loftiness of some versions of multiculturalism. At times a jaundiced onlooker could get the impression that some supporters of multiculturalism (and immigration, come to that) see these 'causes' primarily as a means of self-improvement or self-perfection, a means to opening their own sympathies to other peoples, cultures and ways of life, almost as ends in themselves. In turn this stance often depends upon exaggerating the moral deficiencies of the majority of their fellow-Australians. And so we find familiar features of cultural criticism in Australia today – the almost limbo-dancing lowness of the threshold of cultural anxiety, where any and every 'irruption' of inter-cultural tension is taken as the national rising of the racist unconscious; the determination to see the mass of one's fellow-citizens as willing dupes of every ill-intentioned populist; the metaphor of the 'dog-whistle', with its implication that the majority of Australians, after all, are little more than pets.

The key problem with this way of 'doing' multiculturalism – and here I should say with deference to Hage that while I'm drawing upon his narrative, I'm also going well beyond it – is that it provides no vantage-point from which disputes between members of 'peripheral' groups and members of the core can be understood, except through the prism of cultural domination. Since the core is, as it were, culturally blank, the behaviours of its members can't be interpreted in cultural terms.

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To put the matter crudely, when 'ethnics' or other outsiders riot, routine sociological explanations are given – frustration, marginalisation, distress. When members of the presumed core culture riot – and particularly when their riot itself has the character of a cultural protest – this has necessarily to be read as a deeper and more profound phenomenon, the basis for which is seen to lie in the essentially racist character of societies like ours. Those angry young men at Cronulla aren't drunk surfers, or chauvinistic boyfriends – they're the national unconscious, incarnate.

And yet there's an even darker irony here. It's often true that when young men of marginal social or economic status riot, they're expressing some wider distress which their fellow-citizens, and policy-makers, ought to take seriously. But the framework through which 'progressive' folks mostly interpreted the Cronulla riots and their aftermath mostly works to preclude any such concerns. The surfer-boys' concern that 'their' beaches had been taken over by outsiders, that the public space of the area had been made less safe, and their girlfriends' sunbaking less secure, are no doubt overblown. But they at least need to be listened to.

On the other side of the trenches, there's no doubt that the groups of young men who drove from south-west Sydney to the south-east for an epic bout of property-damage are products of a culture marked by considerable social distress. Because of the familiar political sensitivities, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has been deeply reluctant until recently to release data which would enable researchers to correlate employment levels with family background and culture of origin. After a period of discussion, however, they released these figures from the 2001 Census – and the results are salutary. The overall unemployment rate in 2001 was 7.1%. Among longstanding migrants from Lebanon it was about double this, while among recent arrivals (over the previous five years) it was a full four times the national average (or almost 29%). Others have analysed the raw ABS data in more detail. According to *The Australian's* George Megalogenis, more detailed unemployment figures for Lebanese-Australians are even more troubling. While a little over 6% of Australian couple-families have nobody in work, among Lebanese-Australian families the same rate is over 37%. And researchers at Monash University (whom, it should be said, are immigration-sceptics) have divided the figures both by country of origin and religion, discovering that the figures for (generally more recent) Muslim Lebanese migrants are much higher than those for their Christian Lebanese cousins.

It would be wrong to over-emphasise these figures, worrying though they are. The Arab and Lebanese neighbourhoods of south-west Sydney are not simply morasses of deprivation and suffering – they're also havens of mirror-walled gyms, customised cars, and electronics stores. It's also true that parts of south-western Sydney have higher than average arrest-rates

for certain crimes. But then, the hard-core surfing community in Sydney's south-east also has a rather chequered history with the law. It's probably no coincidence that the epicentre of the riots was a suburban youth culture revolving around creative idleness and illegal employment, or that the cult-heroes of the local surfer community are a group of young brothers whose family history is almost a clinical case of family dysfunction. Indeed, in some respects the average socio-economic situations of the young Middle Eastern and 'Anglo' men who vied for control of Cronulla's streets are probably rather similar.

And yet the prism through which many 'progressives' viewed the Cronulla events and their aftermath preclude discussion of almost all these issues. Are recent Lebanese migrants at risk of becoming an alienated underclass? Are the beachside communities of Sydney's south some kind of cultural tinderbox? How are we to manage public behaviour and etiquette in contested public spaces to allow respect for all? How best do we attempt to reconcile differences between local communities, 'ethnic' and otherwise, when they come into conflict over these shared public resources? As things stand, it's not at all clear what 'critical' intellectuals have to contribute to these discussions. And that's a pity.

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Endnotes

The summary figures for migrants and unemployment can be found in *Australia's Most Recent Immigrants*, ABS publication no. 2053.0, authored by Graeme Hugo.

George Megalogenis's misleadingly-titled 'The threat from within' was published in *The Australian*, 8-9 April 2006.

'Lebanese Muslims in Australia and Social Disadvantage', by Katherine Betts and Ernest Healy, was published in *People and Place*, vol.14. no.1, 2006.

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