The Moral Dynamics of Riots in Contemporary Australia

John Owen*

Introduction

Since the publication of Stanley Cohen's influential text *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* in 1972 a whole variety of social disorder has been seen through the prism of media construction. Moral panics have become a norm of their own in scholarly accounts of social disturbance, as though reporters were themselves creators of moral virtue, and as if society's concerns about disruptions to everyday harmony were born (and subsequently died) with such accounts. Cause for moral panic was, by design, a reaction to events out of the ordinary, received and appropriated by the civic mass through a careful consideration and select representation of the facts. In Cohen's (1980:16-17) words:

> The media have long operated as agents of moral indignation in their own right: even if they are not self-consciously engaged in crusading or muck-raking, their reporting of certain 'facts' can be sufficient to generate concern, anxiety, indignation or panic. When such feelings coincide with a perception that particular values need to be protected, the preconditions for new rule creation or social problem definition are present ... What might result is the sort of symbolic process [where] there is a change in the public designation of deviance ... [hence] the problem drinker changes from 'repentant' to 'enemy' to 'sick'.

That any claim for moral indignation, or indeed panic, might be made on the part of participants in social disturbances was clearly (and promptly) disregarded. Instead, insight into the 'moral' dimension of disturbances has pivoted around the naming and shaming of so-called 'folk devils', by demonstrating that powerful institutions were too involved in representing the collective social conscience (and not nearly as active in representing their real or underlying interests) (cf. Chomsky 1989; Danielian 1992; Zaller 1992; Hawthorne

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* Centre for Applied Research in Social Science, University of New England, Armidale, NSW, 2351.

1993; Myers & Caniglia 2003). One conscientious protester turn graffiti artist captured this sentiment rather precisely during the World Economic Forum in Melbourne 2000 when they wrote 'I couldn't afford to buy off the media so I bought this paint instead' (cited in Cahill 2001:63).

In a previous article I had expressed concern about the short sightedness of the media in their representation of the Macquarie Fields Riots (Owen 2006). They were of course not the only perpetrators, but they were the most recognisable. Through heightening public awareness of the various aspects of the events, and focusing primarily on the confrontation by members of the New South Wales Police Force and members of the community, media commentators had successfully driven a wedge between Macquarie Fields and the remaining public. Talkback radio was perhaps the most insidious by encouraging harder measures of suppression and by beating down any possibility that residents might in fact have a legitimate grievance against authorities.

Labelling theorists, perhaps the best known of the interactionist approaches in popular criminology, have distinguished themselves by showing a great amount of scholarly ineptitude in their handling of 'morality', particularly when the normative basis of this morality is expressed as a product of interactions between supposed 'rule makers' and 'rule breakers'. It has been my view that the moral panic model is exactly the type of vilification that is to be expected when seemingly 'profane' or 'vulgar' communities are placed at the centre of events and, that it is no wonder that scholars should seek to unpick the legitimacy of *that* morality, rather than to engage in the much more risky business of establishing a moral sense among the participants themselves. Cohen's legacy in this respect has been to muddle the boundaries between order, convention and normativity (Cohen 1980:18; cf. Gouldner 1968; Liazos 1972). Indeed, even dominion-sensitive democratic theory fails to account for the normative dimension of popular protest when the spectre of legality draws too near (Habermas 1985; Bronitt & Williams 1996:290-291).

That short sightedness still stands and, as it has come to pass, stands as though it were a beacon of insight into the dynamics of the riots and the minds of the rioters. Media institutions presented the popular view that disadvantage, social stigma, riots and bad community publicity were part and parcel of one deeply embedded (and socially reproduced) cycle of socio-spatial depression.

This is not to suggest that total responsibility rested with the media. In some respects the media had merely conveyed the message of politicians and other commentators, including academics. Whatever their angle on the events, and however this might have been distorted in their reporting, much of the confusion that arose around Macquarie Fields was situated between individual responsibility and the failure of public policy in a run-down public housing estate.

Meanderings from the Margins

Common to a number of the Australian events is the socio-economic disadvantage faced by the communities in which the riots have taken place. The class status of these groups has been an area of confusion for many experts, unsure of what to make of their structural disadvantage, or in post-structural terms, how to negotiate the interplay between agents and the various 'assemblages' of governing institutions (Dean & Hindess 1998:8). One view that has gained currency, for instance, is that rioters are responding from the margins of long-term economic neglect, and that underneath the surface of disadvantage runs a bubbling stream of isolation, rage and dissent (Cook 2006:44-45; Burchell 2007; cf. Norden 2004).

The class-based explanation of riots is something of a double-edged sword and few Australian commentators have avoided impaling either themselves or their arguments upon it. While it must be agreed that class is indeed a factor, at least as a common economic denominator among rioters, there are important limitations in this approach. Important as the public housing issue is, and whatever insight it generates in our comprehension of local grievance, it invites one vital question: if housing or socio-spatial based disadvantage rests at the heart of riots, what is to differentiate Macquarie Fields from other suburbs similarly affected by youth unemployment, poor transport networks, etc? Are we to see a replay in Claymore, Salisbury, Coledale, Inala, Airds, Mt. Druitt, Richmond and the like?

The relationship between economic disadvantage and crime is presupposed to be a relatively straightforward one. Without doubt one can assert that a correlation exists between poverty and vulnerability, whether it is vulnerability to crime or to abuse or neglect by authorities; but we need to be careful of what we make of this. In particular, a distinction ought to be made between a person being *vulnerable to crime* and a person amounting to a *criminal-in-waiting*. Without this important distinction we end up making silly claims, such as 'poverty makes people vulnerable to crime, and that's why poor people are criminals'.

Since the rioters are predominantly young people, few commentators can help but invoke their own aged-based explanations (which are no less silly or confused): 'Young people can sometimes be victims of unemployment, isolation and inactivity. This leads to boredom, and bored young people are likely to commit crimes'.

These are problematic. Aside from making it near impossible to take class or disadvantage seriously, popular commentary bases its claims on two further complications.

First, we know that rioters in Redfern, Palm Island, Macquarie Fields are economically disadvantaged, but at what point does disadvantage physically trigger someone to commit crime? Secondly, because popular commentary fails to separate the initial crime (e.g., car theft) from the ensuing riot itself, many experts mislabel the act of riot as 'criminal', or worse still, promote the idea that the reason for protesting is to defend some prior right to commit criminal acts (such as car theft). These notions are merely extensions of the same absurdity.

There are, of course, more sophisticated methods of handling the connection between socio-economic marginalisation, crime and riots, as Don Weatherburn (2006:30-31) has illustrated:

> The dominant way in which disadvantage contributes to the risk of a riot, then, is through the creation of chronically high-crime communities. It is in the context of such communities that the immediate precursors to a riot (fear, chronic anger and frustration, social alienation, overzealous policing and a poor response to calls for police assistance) are most likely to take root ... There is strong evidence that, when police behave in ways that erode their perceived legitimacy, the outcome in disadvantaged communities is higher rates of violent crime.

What Weatherburn terms the 'immediate precursors to a riot' is not to be mistaken for causation, primarily because there is a fundamental gap between the riot being carried out by community members who believe their actions are warranted, and the event being interpreted through the lens of legality which transforms community sanctioned protest into mere 'criminal behaviour' (cf. Weatherburn 2001; Lieberson & Silverman 1965; Hanh & Feagin 1970; Perez et al 2003).

That police may have failed to apply an appropriate standard and duty of care in their pursuits and handling of suspects has only now come to the fore as a primary cause of the

events. It is well understood that three young men — one in Redfern and two in Macquarie Fields — perished as a result of a police pursuit. An Indigenous man died whilst in police custody in the Palm Island community. Yet, even where deaths and police action have been linked, little investigation has been made into whether police may have acted inappropriately. Following the Macquarie Fields riots, local residents expressed concern over the attitudes and behaviour of police officers. One Macquarie Fields resident claimed that local officers were accustomed to 'throwing blokes into the back of paddy wagons' and 'taking them on joy rides where they beat the shit out of them' (Owen 2006). A critical distinction is to be made here between moral indignation at the behaviour of police officers and what Rob White (2006:3) has observed to be 'anti-authority resistance'. The moral content of indignation is invoked when conduct is examined from within the system of authority and order and not by questioning the validity of the system itself.

We have here a case of scholars not going far enough in their analysis of events. Too much attention has been levied at countering the blaming and shaming of rioters and in trying too hard to explain their actions as merely the natural outcome of prolonged economic strain. An example is Murray Lee (2006, 2007) who has followed Jock Young along the path of policy failure, into the dark and misty woods of *the exclusive society*, through the valley of law and order and has entered the river of mutual suspicion. The river of mutual suspicion is no small theoretical landmark. Criminologists of this mindset have stood before this great divide in recent years, and despite coming to terms with its presence, and acknowledging its place in our common logical geography, they have dared not cross its limits.

Let us look first at Young's (1999) journey down this rather uneasy path. Standing in the disheartened woodlands of market capitalism, Young observes that '[e]conomic marginalisation is a potent source of discontent'. From the lows of the valley looking out toward the river he notes that '"political" marginalisation in the sense of manifest powerlessness in the face of authority is the catalyst that transforms discontent into crime'. The river of mutual suspicion has a distinctly familiar sense about it, and Young (1999:161) describes it as such: 'For it is the very fact of the force of law and order acting illegitimately which snaps the moral bind of the marginalised that is already strained and weakened by economic deprivation and inequality'.

Murray Lee has recorded, in his journey, the bleak scenery that so many others have noted when traversing this path. Taking a closer look at 'dissent' and 'rioting', Lee discovers in the woodlands, and across the valley plains, a certain uncomfortable truth about the Australian context: that they have been 'triggered by issues' of 'disadvantage, inequity, social isolation, poor governance, and community breakdown' (Lee 2006:34). Upon reaching the river Lee (2006:34) makes a startling observation. Portrayed with a keen eye for detail, mutual suspicion is depicted as thus, '... each episode has involved the exercise of police powers in a way that was perceived to – and in some cases did – occasion death ... each has occurred in a context where the relations between the community and police were already strained'.

I wish to stress that I am not trying to reduce in significance the impact of class in affecting the availability and content of personal choice. I take seriously the notion that agents are 'gardeners of circumstance'. However, riots are not part of everyday 'circumstance' and rioting behaviour does not feature in the day to day 'reasoning' of people afflicted by disadvantage. It is the substance of moral indignation and mutual suspicion here that need more careful attention because there are important questions to be asked about the moral obligations that exist between authorities, such as police, and the

community. If we are able to ask such questions, with the presumption that authorities, too, have an obligation to abide by moral protocols, and to maintain understood protocols of behaviour, then we are in a better position to probe how communities might respond when faced with deaths in suspicious circumstances; and why foot pursuits, car pursuits and deaths in custody have each been contested as inappropriate law enforcement and public safety outcomes.

Intellectually Hazardous Business

Riots are by their very definition a rather tumultuous set of events (Hinton 2003). Irrespective of their definition, however, they do not, as many things in the social world, lend themselves to easy explanation. Aside from the inevitable disagreement about methods and approach, there is the almost unexplored question of which part of the event is to be tackled by scholars, and as it happens, whether that part, if any, can (or should) be untangled at all.

That Australia has a long history of popular protest, riots and acts of social disorder, is not to say that these events are to be understood as having any easily defined sense of continuity or, given their respective differences, be best understood as essentially scatter-shot, historically isolated, one-off events. One area of thematic convergence is the role attached to 'violence', or its absence, as a defining criterion of 'riots' and other such forms of popular protest. Comparable problems of interpretation and analysis have also arisen around 'football hooliganism', particularly when so-called 'hooligans' exhibit non-violent norms (Stott et al 2007:77).

Any observer of political affairs in Australia would notice a certain paradox in the tone of public conversation. Despite the institution of anti-protest laws and legislation against sedition (McGlone 2005), the tone of some public dialogue has been quite rowdy indeed. Recent spates in Palm Island, Redfern, Macquarie Fields and Cronulla have been subject to intense media coverage, which have focused on violence, public disorder and social disharmony. The idea that tensions are brewing in the community has been a particularly popular one among academics who have focused their attention on the long-term failure of State and Federal governments to come to terms with issues like public housing, unemployment, multiculturalism and policing.

The argument espoused in my article (2006) developed around a clarification of two different types of 'morality', one formulated in panic mode and one expressed by the crowd in 'indignation' mode. One might say that this was as simple as looking at morality *from below* as distinct from seeing it *from above*.

Social historians have, for over 40 years of scholarship, sought to uncover the human qualities of events that would otherwise have been dismissed as crude, brash or uncultured. The social history that surrounds popular protest has shown that far from criminals acting out spontaneous, uncontrolled, violent urges, protestors considered themselves as acting in defence of, and in accordance with, commonly held expectations and principles. As a point of difference, morality *from below* is concerned with how communities legitimate particular acts and expressions in accordance with moral protocols, and how these protocols shape the dynamics of blame, indignation and the like. The panic view *from above*, by contrast 'invariably combines narratives of unbridled criminality with victims of disadvantage' (Cunneen 2007:24).

Moral protocols might also in this context be understood as a set of conventions or customs developed over time through contact with and between different sections of the

community, including members holding positions of authority, such as police. Evidently, in order to sustain such a position one must first possess an historical cast of mind. After all, custom without history, much like common law without precedent, is a meaningless idea indeed. According to Lee, we ought to exercise caution when seeing historical continuities in the behaviour of protesting crowds because:

> The appeal to history, though, is a hazardous business – especially in … trying to find the actual continuities in resistance. I am less convinced that any essentialist version of history – such as the dominant one of a free working class interfered with since the 18th century by the bourgeois state apparatus – is either necessary or sufficient to make sense of delinquency or youth culture today (Cohen cited in Lee 2007:59-60).

It is important to state here that Lee has fallen into confusing 'panic' with 'protocol' and there is nothing inherent in the indignation approach that implies (or requires the construction of events as depending upon) delinquency. That protocols require a reading of events from within their particular historical context should not be frowned upon as either 'essentialist' or considered intellectually 'hazardous business'.

Palm Island is a case in point. In coming to terms with this riot, we must also come to terms with the symbolic meaning of the events surrounding it. Mr Doomadgee's death was not an isolated event. To the contrary, there are notable continuities leading up to it. In the 15 years prior, the recorded number of Indigenous deaths in custody is staggering. According to Juodo (2006) the period 1990-2004 had seen 39 deaths in police custody, 45 deaths in the course of police operations, and 145 deaths in prisons.

If the community had developed a measure of suspicion regarding biases in the criminal justice system, and in particular, the behaviour of police officers, these would have been confirmed when the coroner concluded that a Queensland police officer had 'caused the fatal injuries' (Cunneen 2007:26). The injuries were considerable; Mr Doomadgee had suffered 'four broken ribs, a ruptured spleen and … his liver was almost cleaved in two' (Cunneen 2007:26). The autopsy findings were presented to the Doomadgee family on 23 November 2004 before being read to a community meeting held by the Palm Island Aboriginal Council the following day. Later 300 members of the community had congregated around the police station and courthouse where they proceeded to set the buildings alight (Hollinsworth 2005:16).

There are more recent examples. On New Year's Eve 2005, 100 Indigenous men were alleged to have torched a police car and broken a police officer's jaw in Dubbo's Gordon public housing estate. The riot followed community allegations of abuse by police officers during the arrest of a minor. As one community member recalls:

> 'We've got no trouble with him being arrested, but it's the way they do it. They started to bash him,' she said. 'His mother saw what was happening and she came tearing across the paddocks and then they were bashing her. Then her brother, his uncle, came to help, and he got smashed in the jaw. You can't blame people for jumping in' (Overington 2006).

In January 2007, incidents of riot were recorded in two remote Indigenous communities surrounding claims of police brutality and suspected wrong-doing. On 9 January, the town of Aurukun witnessed 300 local men and women lay siege to the local police station after a local man had claimed to have been bashed around in the watch-house. In an attempt to disperse the crowd a police officer fired off a single round of gunfire. The crowd then proceeded to the local tavern where they stole a considerable quantity of alcohol (Gerard 2007). The acting Queensland Police Commissioner Dick Conder later revealed to the press that the man 'had admitted his minor injuries were inflicted by his brother' (Stafford 2007). In the same period, the Arnhem land community of Maningrida had also witnessed a crowd

of 100 people trashing the local police station following the arrest of an Aboriginal man (Storry 2007).

Without a clear picture of preceding circumstances what is to distinguish the Palm Island riot from an act of collective fire-raising or to separate the events in Dubbo, Aurukun and Maningrida from out-and-out community sanctioned vandalism? Could there be something of significance here in the destroying of marked police property by Indigenous communities? In the words of Marshall Sahlins (1985:154), '[e]vents cannot be understood apart from the values attributed to them: the significance that transforms a mere happening into a fateful conjuncture: What is for some people a radical event may appear to others as a date for lunch'.

Far from seeing history as 'old' or 'essentialising', the continuities of sentiment and circumstance that culminate in moral indignation are necessary components of analysis. According to Sahlins (1985:156), the value and significance of an event is to be sourced amidst the 'indissoluble synthesis of past and present, system and event, structure and history'. More broadly, an event, such as the ones we have been examining can be placed within a wider social and political context (cf. Dawson 2005). In Sahlins (1985:xii) prose 'a given society will have certain strategic sites of historical action, evenementially hot areas, and other areas relatively closed' and the continuity of events of protest and civil disobedience in Australian history over the past 30-odd years is especially telling in this respect.[1]

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1   One need not stop here in detailing the prevalence of popular protest and riot in Australia. Roberts, for instance, details a vast array of protests by convicts at the Wellington Convict station throughout the mid-1820s, including idleness, insubordination, feigning sickness, the pilfering of food, the burning of wheat sacks, the driving away of livestock, etc. See Roberts (2000:59). One should not forget the Female Factory riot at Parramatta in 1827 (Kent 1994) or the military food riot in Sydney in 1828 (Ihde 2001). Alan Atkinson's (1979) seminal study into patterns of convict protest between 1824 and 1838 denotes a period where, as he states, the 'bench books are full of convict protests' (p30). There were of course the Chinese Protests on the Victorian Goldfields in 1857 following the imposition of a racially based 10 entry tax and a 1 annual maintenance levy in 1855 (see Messner 2000). Ethnic violence and popular protest featured prominently throughout the 1850s and well into the 1870s (Mayne 2004). Damien Murphy from the *Sydney Morning Herald* had, in 2005, pointed to Cronulla as 'possibly Australia's biggest racist protest since vigilante miners killed two Chinese at Lambing Flat in 1860'. In 1887, a riot broke out at Eagle Farm over the 'Sandgate Handicap' after punters witnessed what they claimed to be a 'corrupt turf practice' in which trees were uprooted, seats broken, and the winners plates on the judge's stand destroyed (Jamison 1996:21). One might wish to point to the Brisbane anti-German riots of 1915-16 led overwhelmingly by returned soldiers (Evans 1987), the Anti-Greek Riots in 1916 (Yannakis 1996), the Broome Race Riots in 1920 (Schaper 1995) or the Kalgoorlie Race Riots of 1934 (Gregson 2001). The Hunter Valley in NSW observed one of the largest industrial protests in Australian history when 5000 miners marched to oppose the introduction of non-unionised mining following a coal strike at Rothbury Colliery (Meacham 2007). Adelaide in the 1930s witnessed industrial protests contesting the right to work and the right to basic food provisions whilst out of work (Whitelock 1977). In the early 1940s Australian and American servicemen clashed on numerous occasions, reportedly over the right to female companionship. Clashes were both frequent and physical and within the space of one week in October the following causalities were listed: one Australian dead and three wounded as the result of a knife fight, one US medical orderly slashed, one Australian soldier shot by an American police officer in Townsville, three US soldiers and one (female) Australian civilian stabbed. This escalated into what is known as the 'Battle of Brisbane' on 26 November 1942 where approximately 2000 Australians attempted to raid the American Postal Exchange. The battle continued into other centres across Australia with a disturbance recorded in Melbourne on 1 December 1942, a 'battle for Bondi' on 6 February 1943 and battles over Perth and Fremantle in the April of 1944 (Evans & Donegan 2004:206-212). The late 1950s was not immune to a little rioting either, see Evans (1997) on the rock'n' roll riots in Brisbane, 1956-57.

Since the late 1960s the Australian community has both watched and participated in protests and rallies ranging from small town labour disputes at Wave Hill in the Northern Territory between 1967 and 1972, to the Moratorium against Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War whereby 120,000 people turned out to show their opposition, through to small scale protests against the involvement of a South African Lifesaving team at Coogee Beach in eastern Sydney in 1971, which was followed by a more dramatic demonstration against the Springbok tour of Australia in the same year (Fitzgerald 1984). All of these were dwarfed by the protest rally held in Canberra following the decision by the Governor General to dismiss the Labor Government in 1975. Four years later in September 1979, a riot broke out in the port town of Newcastle following the closure of a popular and eclectic music venue, the Star Hotel.

Throughout the 1980s popular protest and riot continued to intrude upon Australia's socio-political landscape. Bathurst for example, recorded a major incidence of riot in 1985 with clashes between bikers and police at the Australian Grand Prix, having had goal riots in both 1970 and 1974 (Cunneen & Lynch 1988; Cunneen et al 1989). Between 1985 and 1986, Victorian nurses, in an attempt to secure award conditions, held a 50 day strike, the longest strike by women since the tailorresses' strike some 200 years earlier. The rural township of Brewarrina in New South Wales witnessed an occasion of riot following the death of Lloyd Boney in 1987 while in police custody. The Franklin river protests in the early 1980s struck a chord both at local and regional levels with major ramifications. Thousands of demonstrators marched the streets of Hobart on an issue that eventuated in 1500 non-violent protestors being arrested and the resignation of the State Labor Premier after his party had split on the matter (Grabosky 1989; Branagan 2004). The 1980s in fact saw an almost continuous display of protests over Indigenous and environmental issues, including the land rights and treaty marches. Protests at Noonkanbah in the Kimberly region of Western Australia in 1979 and 1980 were powerful statements about customary entitlement, Aboriginal law and the will of the local community in their efforts to prevent exploration drilling near the Yungngora community settlement (White 1990).

Mass forms of conscientious protest were also a prevalent feature of popular politics in Australia during the latter part of the 1990s. Responding to national and international issues, protests were held around matters of race, multiculturalism and the Australian identity following the rise of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party in 1998. Following the proposed closure of Richmond Secondary College in Melbourne, 'a group calling themselves FRIENDS OF RICHMOND SECONDARY COLLEGE OCCUPATION COMMITTEE' occupied the school for 12 months between 1992 and 1993 in protest of a government plan to establish the Melbourne Girls' College on the site (Rooney 1995:70). Many Australians rallied at community pickets in support of the Australian Maritime Workers Union conflict, depicted as governmental-employer sanctioned attacks on the waterfront. In 1996 there was the 'Cavalcade to Canberra' protest against a proposed workplace relations Bill, followed in 1997 by the Third Wave campaign in Perth against the labour relations legislation in Western Australia (Bailey & Iveson 2000:521-525). There were protests in support of the right to self-determination in Timor Leste in 1999,[2] and in 2000 there were violent clashes between police and protesters in Melbourne during the World Economic Forum (Grenfell

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2   The self-determination effort in Timor Leste has itself been the subject of rioting. On 4 March 2007 after
     Australian soldiers shot four armed supporters of Alfredo Reinado. riots were recorded in Dili, Gleno and
     Ermera (Murdoch & Forbes 2007).

2005; McCulloch 2001).[3] Similar protests were held on 14 November 2002 in opposition to the World Trade Organisation meeting in Sydney (Vedelago 2003).

At the turn of the new millennium, popular protest remained closely tied to the popular conscience and opinion with repeated shows of dissatisfaction at the Australian contribution to war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq between 2003 and 2004. If it was to appear that the collective consciousness of the country was overly pre-occupied with issues beyond the nation's shores, the nationwide protests by students against increasing the cost of tertiary education in 2004, and the nationwide protests against the new industrial relations regime throughout 2006 were vital signals that mass demonstration could be spurred on by a wide range of domestic and international issues.[4]

Ironically it has been the more localised forms of protest and disorder that have generated national attention in past years. While few may be interested in the days of protest that took place between lobby groups and the New South Wales and Australian Capital Territory governments over the proposed culling of kangaroos at Googong Dam in 2004, or the 50-plus anti-logging protestors in the Weld Valley who, led by the State's Green Leader, broke through police exclusion zones; the same cannot be said for the outbreaks of disorder in places like Palm Island, Redfern and Macquarie Fields. Similarly, local disputes about the use of foreign contract labour in Toowoomba in 2006, or the three week occupation of a campus bar by disgruntled students at Monash University in 2005, yielded very little interest and national concern when compared to the fear of social meltdown depicted at Cronulla beach in late 2005.

Unintelligible Indignation

How does one account for the divergent motivations to action between, say, Cronulla Beach and the campus bar at Monash University? Neither, as we understand it, could be depicted as being contextually similar to a suburban public housing estate. Both were, and presumably still are, places in which various subsections of the community socialise, communicate, contest space (formally or informally) and form cliques around shared interests and beliefs. Participants in their explanation of events no doubt produced claims in which the protesting party appeared aggrieved by one circumstance or another. Both were, I presume, sensitive to the dynamics of authority and dominance present in their respective contexts. Stretching a finding demonstrated in Macquarie Fields to cover events quite different in place and time might be, I agree, asking a little too much; but not so drastically disparate that we should sacrifice everything – or indeed nothing – to the rigours of examining historical context.

The moral indignation approach is not without its limitations and it would be foolhardy not to acknowledge this. It cannot, for example, be taken as a euphemism for class struggle, no matter how cohesive the crowd may seem at the time. It does not serve as an explanation for policy formulation or, more problematically, provide reasons for why some policy initiatives are favoured over others. It cannot make one example of protest any more or any less *moral* than others. Take for instance the 5000 or so protest letters received by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 1994 over its decision to televise the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (Marsh 1995). Certainly both the protestors and the parade

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3   An absence of popular protest surrounding Sydney's hosting of the Olympic Games in 2000 has also been duly noted by Cunneen (2000).

4   Amid all of this was the display of protest at the plight of asylum seekers in outsourced detention centres across Australia. See for example, Naseeb-Khan (2001) and Bean (2002).

organisers would claim some commonly felt legitimacy in their respective positions, and undoubtedly, make reference to one, or another, kind of moral statement regarding the validity of their particular stance. If, for example, a person is pro-gay rights, should that person then disengage from attempting to understand the moral basis underpinning the protest letters? Is the point of an exercise aimed at demonstrating the moral basis of different kinds of collective action, to rule in certain values sets, only by ruling others out? Should the detailing of one set of collective actions be taken as holding a romantic view of those actions merely because they were explored at the expense of a competing or alternative set? The point is to provide an explanatory framework for the substance of riot causation based on collective belief about the proper order of social relations in a given place between particular community members, not to be a moral adjudicator.

As Raymond Williams has argued, the mixing of literary categories, such as 'romanticism' with social issues is a recipe for confusion and distortion (Williams 1988 cited in Knowles 2004:9). Substituting 'irrationality' for 'romanticism' to assert a literary binary by which to pigeonhole the rioters both misrepresents *and* undermines the ethical reasoning displayed by the crowd.[5] Collective moral indignation has been labelled 'unintelligible' by Lee because it forces 'us to rationalise the actions of the participants as both directed and uncontaminated by the limitations in which their dissent is conducted' is misleading and the language passé (Lee 2007:60). One would have thought we had moved on from the language of binaries. By the late 1980s the urge to slide back into it had all but passed; some that were slow on the uptake could be seen brandishing the dichotomy wand in the 1990s, but the social sciences (even the post-structuralists) appeared sound on the idea that such intellectual discretions should not make their way into the new millennium.

Clearly, the indignation approach is not based on a rationalistic paradigm but around a normative position about human action and collective reasoning. Could this be the rationality/irrationality binary that Lee is drawn to? If the moral indignation approach is guilty in conceding too much in the way of social structure or legality, it does so in defiance of institutionalists who seek to understand interaction but for all their efforts can see nothing but symbols of control, distortion and authority. The indignation model is not anti-structure, it is pro-motive and belief. In the example of Macquarie Fields it is the so-called interactionists that negate the meaning of moral protocols, not those following and advocating the 'moral indignation' approach. If there is a degree of rationalisation here, it is one based on rendering intelligible meaning from the playing out of social events. Unless Lee is advocating on behalf of radical ethnographers or phenomenologists, then this kind of rationalisation is to be expected from us all.

Conclusion

Riots in contemporary Australia are both many and diverse. It is possible, and indeed prudent, that these events be examined with respect to their particular locality. We should not, in doing so, allow our demand for contextual specificity to override the expectations that communities place on the behaviour of authorities and themselves. This expectation is mediated by moral protocols established as a product of relations between community and authority over time. Recognition of social memory or custom is not synonymous with 'essentialism' in history or irrational 'romanticism'. In the same way, neither should we lapse into the belief that morality and rationality are substantive antonyms.

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5   Further, if one is serious about avoiding the traps of a rationality/irrationality bind, then one should also be careful not to conflate 'riots' with 'youth delinquency' (Lee 2007:60).

The reduction of events to their structural/material conditions is a partial and sterile analytical practice if one is seeking to understand the nature of riot causation. It also detracts from the reasoning applied by rioters if the task is to understand their motivations and the basis of expressed indignation. Over-institutionalisation of riot motives runs the deep risk of ruling out the significance of both causation and protocols. Indeed, if the institutionalised disadvantage position is to hold the topic of riots would merely be the manifest expression of but one stage in a cycle of socio-spatial depression. How does one reason with this kind of continuity?

To make sense of these continuities in the places where they count the most requires that scholars engage in the necessary and more fruitful business of recognising patterns of morality *from below*, regardless of how vulgar they may appear *from above*.

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