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'The Terror of Racism': Constructing the good white nation through discourses of values and belonging

CLEMENCE DUE

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'The Terror of Racism': Constructing the good white nation through discourses of values and belonging

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Responding to media questioning in relation to possible causes of the December 2005 Cronulla riots, Australian Prime Minister John Howard stated that he 'did not believe there was an underlying racism in Australia'. He made this comment despite the existence of images which circulated in the media clearly depicting white Australians wearing T shirts saying 'no Lebs', chanting 'Aussie Aussie Aussie', and even people proclaiming 'we grew here you flew here' and 'go home'.

In the days prior to the Cronulla riots, text messages were circulated stating:

Aussies: This Sunday every f---ing Aussie in the shire, get down to North Cronulla to help support Leb and Wog bashing day. Bring your mates down and let's show them that this is our beach and their (sic) never welcome back (cited in Wilson, 2005).

However, despite the relatively explicit nature of the racialised violence that such statements would suggest formed the basis of the riots, there was still considerable debate amongst predominately white media commentators around the 'causes' of the riots. Such debates were predominately concerned with whether or not the riots were motivated by racial issues, or whether they were the result of other factors such as 'boys being boys', alcohol, and the supposedly traditional competition between different groups of people (irrespective of race) on Australian beaches.

This paper will consider the various ways in which the Cronulla riots were constructed and explained within the media. In particular, the paper identifies three main discourses which were mobilised to explain the riots in the press. These were; whether or not the riots could be considered to have been motivated by racism (and the corresponding denial of racism in the press); the deployment of 'Australian values' to account for the violence of white Australians; and finally a construction of belonging that delineated who is seen to belong within a certain space (in this case Cronulla beach), and further, who is able to make decisions about that space. The following sections outline literature which has previously analysed the ways in which racism is played out through the media, and the deployment of discourses of values and belonging to warrant particular forms of white Australian national identity.

Racism

The question of whether or not the Cronulla riots were racially motivated was one of the most contentious points in subsequent discussion around the riots, and discourses denying any form of racist behaviour were common in the press. Such discourses serve a socio-political function, in that if the fundamental role that racism

plays in shaping social relations is denied, then any resistance to, or allegations of racism are de-legitimised. In other words, if there is no racism in the first place then it follows that there is no need for official measures against it (Van Dijk, 1992).

If racism is acknowledged at all, it is frequently localised to a specific area, (such as Cronulla), and a specific incident (such as the December 2005 riots). One outcome of this is that racism is not considered to have any relation to the overall attitudes or behaviours of dominant group members (Van Dijk, 1992). Once again, this serves to deny the existence of racism as an ideology that affects interaction on a more personal day-to-day level. This is reflected in the press, where racism is usually depicted as being elsewhere, and therefore is not a problem for, or applicable to, 'us' 'now' (Van Dijk, 1992). As such, this strategy of denying the existence of racism in a country "reinterprets, marginalises and integrates evidence of racism" (Szuchewycz, 2000, p. 497), and therefore reinforces a dominant view of the country as being tolerant and welcoming.

This strategy of positive self-presentation is reflective of the fact that racism is rarely acknowledged as being a problem in Australia at all in order to present the country in a positive light. Instead of acknowledging the existence of racism, there is a fear that racism in Australia will be revealed to be the inherent problem that it actually is. It is this fear of the exposure of an inherent racism that the title of this paper refers to by the 'terror' of racism. In other words, whilst racism might in fact be an underlying issue in Australia, acts of racism are only seen to be a problem when they are explicitly acted upon in events like the Cronulla riots. It follows that events like Cronulla are a threat because they reveal that in fact Australia does have an underlying issue with racism which is not acknowledged. However it is important that this underlying racism in white Australia *is* acknowledged in order for events like Cronulla to be both better understood as explicit acts of an underlying pervasive issue rather than just one-off incidents, and therefore for steps to be made for racism to be dealt with and events such as the Cronulla riots to be prevented.

Values

Discourses concerning those values which supposedly differentiate white Australians from other cultural groups were also prevalent following the riots. The concept of 'Australian values' was used not only in order to justify the riots, but also to create a dichotomy between white Australians and other cultural groups. Such a dichotomy assumes that the values shared by white Australians are inherently superior to those of other groups of people, and thus ought to be shared by all people in Australia.

Hage (1998), however, argues that it is ridiculous to consider so-called 'Australian values' as distinguishing values, and to assume that other countries do not share them as well. Not only is this patently the case, but the assertion of 'Australian values' as being the 'best values' serves to disregard the values that migrant people (for example) may bring to Australia, in addition to implicitly constructing all references to 'Australian values' as referring to *white* Australian values. In other words, white people by their very nature are assumed to have superior values to people from other cultures who do not share those same fundamental values. Conversely, this also means that people from other cultures could become known for possible negative values, which, according to this line of argument, cannot be

avoided as it is their 'nature' to be a certain way. Hage provides the example of the stereotype that Jewish people are calculating (Hage, 2003), but more relevant to this study would be the stereotype that all Muslim people are terrorists or that all Lebanese Australian men treat women badly.

Belonging

Adherence to what are often referred to as specifically 'Australian' values is typically regarded to be a prerequisite for a desired assimilation into the dominant culture (in this case, white Australia). As such, it could be argued that in order to belong in Australia, one must be seen to adopt these so-called 'Australian values', and adhere to the norms set by white Australians. Discourses concerning this concept of belonging (both in Australia and more specifically on Cronulla beach) were frequently used in the media following the riots, and were often used in order to explain and justify the riots, and to mitigate the possible racist elements involved.

In his text *Banal Nationalism* (1995), Michael Billig writes that nations are 'imagined' by the people living in them, rather than being founded upon objective criteria. In other words, the people making up the nation have an image of the way they want the nation to look. More specifically, and as Hage (1998) suggests, dominant group members will have an image of what the national space 'ought' to look like, in terms of who gets to occupy that space, and under what conditions. Therefore, it is notions of 'undesirability' rather than 'inferiority' that become important. Such a framework of 'undesirability' is played out in what Pugliese (2003) refers to as the stereotype 'of Middle Eastern appearance', a category that was used frequently in the Cronulla riots. He writes that "the figure of Middle Eastern appearance is constructed by a set of stereotypical attributes, it operates in terms of a *predisposition*: it situates and establishes the cultural ineligibility of a subject's identity *quasi-prior* to the arrival of the subject" (2003, p.4). Stereotypes such as these therefore function to justify exclusion and to warrant acts of violence such as those seen against Lebanese people in the Cronulla riots.

Analysis

Extract 1

'Our Racist Shame' (SMH 12th Dec)

The Premier, Morris Iemma, led a chorus of ferocious condemnation. "These hooligans have brought shame upon themselves," he said. "Some today tried to hide behind the Australian flag. The Australia that I know, and intend to preserve as Premier does not support the sort of behaviour that we saw today."

The Police Commissioner, Ken Moroney, said the rioters – many of them carrying the national flag and even singing the anthem – were "clearly un-Australian".

"I'm ashamed as a man and as the Commissioner of Police," Mr Moroney said. "Never have I seen a mob turn like they have today, particularly on . . . women and . . . the NSW Ambulance Service. That has brought a higher level of shame to those involved."

Mr Moroney said there had “clearly . . . been a level of racial vilification . . . and those who are found to behave this way will be prosecuted”.

Extract 1 appears to condemn the actions at Cronulla by quoting both the Premier of NSW and the Police Commissioner speaking out against the behaviour seen at the riots. However, whilst this is the case, the extract appears to be more concerned with the fact that the actions were seen to be ‘un-Australian’, than that they were racially motivated. Racism is acknowledged to be a factor (the Police Commissioner is quoted as saying that there was ‘... a level of racial vilification’), however it is not considered to be the main problem of the riots.

In a similar way, the responsibility for the violence is seen not to lie with ‘ordinary people’ but with a minority group, in this case described as ‘hooligans’. As such it is only a small handful of people who are held responsible for the violence displayed. ‘Ordinary’ people are not culpable and are not implicated as being racist. Once again, this portrays racism as only existing in the fringes of society, with ‘ordinary’ people neither being affected by racism, nor being responsible for it.

The extract then goes on to quote the Premier as condemning the behaviour at Cronulla, stating that ‘some today tried to hide behind the Australian flag. The Australia that I know... does not support the sort of behaviour that we saw today’. Michael Billig (1995) talks about the use of the flag, where he makes a distinction between those which are ‘waved’ and those which are ‘un-waved’. He writes that, along with more explicit acts of nationalism (such as the Cronulla riots), there are also mundane enactments of nationalism that occur on a day to day basis that are arguably equally as problematic (like a flag hanging from a library). However, acts of nationalism are only considered to be a problem when they are deployed in such a way that is considered explicit and negative. In this case, it is apparent that whilst it is deemed important to proudly be ‘Australian’ (and hence to have the ability to differentiate between being ‘Australian’ and ‘un-Australian’), it is not acceptable to explicitly wave the Australian flag as a marked sign of a claim to nationalism (Billig, 1995). When the behaviour of any individual crosses a certain line (whereby their behaviours shift from national ‘pride’ to national fervour), it becomes unsuitable for them to employ symbols of nationalism that could be misread as violent (such as the flag waving during the riots). This distinction could be compared to the fact that whilst racism may be a day to day occurrence, acts of racism are only condemned once they become explicit such as occurred in the December riots.

Clearly this issue is complicated by the fact that the white people involved in the riots apparently did think that they *were* behaving in an ‘Australian’ manner, and that they were using Australian symbols (such as waving the flag and singing ‘Waltzing Matilda’) in an appropriate way. This raises the issue of who it is exactly that gets to decide what it means to be ‘Australian’ and also what is involved in the much-used notion of ‘Australian values’.

Extract 2

‘Anything to feel proud, be it money or false belief’ (SMH 23rd Dec)

The causes of the violence at Cronulla and Maroubra are more complicated. Anglo Australians have deep if mostly latent reserves of intolerance, but in this they are not

so different from people in most other countries. But as long as outsiders conform to the broadly accepted norms Australians are happy to live harmoniously with them.

It is clear, however, that many Lebanese Muslims have not integrated as well as other waves of postwar immigrants. They are more insular and less willing to intermarry. The macho culture of young Lebanese men is out of tune with modern Australian attitudes about acceptable public behaviour. It is alarming that many of them are in their late 20s and early 30s and are still manifesting juvenile hoonish behaviour.

Extract 2 begins by comparing 'Anglo Australians' to people from other countries, stating that whilst they may be intolerant, so are people of other nationalities. In doing so the extract begins by justifying the intolerance of white Australians and goes on to state that if 'outsiders' conformed to specific norms then white Australians may not be intolerant at all, and would be happy to 'live harmoniously with them'. This positions Lebanese Muslims as the people responsible for conforming to the expectations of white Australians in order for them to be seen to belong in the country. Following this, the article claims that in fact Lebanese Muslims (and particularly men) have not made an effort to conform; that they are 'insular', have a 'macho culture' which is 'out of tune with modern Australian attitudes' and that they display 'juvenile hoonish behaviour'. These repeated criticisms of Lebanese Muslims effectively serves to excuse the actions of white Australians at Cronulla, and ignores the long history of young white Australians' violence towards women and other men.

This second extract explicitly positions Lebanese Muslims as foreigners who do not belong in Australia, unless they conform to certain norms. This concept is established at the very beginning of the article when, in line 3, the word 'outsider' is used. Given that the discussion immediately moves on to Lebanese Muslims, the implicit suggestion is that Lebanese people are a minority group for whom Australia is not home, and is therefore a country in which they do not belong. Further supporting this division is the distinction between the use of the nationalities 'Australians' and 'Lebanese' implying that Lebanese people as a group are not included in the term 'Australians', further positioning them as 'outsiders' who do not belong, nor are necessarily welcome, in the country.

The extract also assumes that there are certain conditions under which immigrants *are* welcome in the country, but that if they do not conform to those 'broadly accepted norms' then they will not be considered to be a part of the Australian community. In other words, in order to belong in Australia people have to conform to the norms and expectations of the dominant (white) culture, and that if this had already been the case then riots like Cronulla would not occur.

This second extract thus constructs the riots to be about issues other than racism, and does not acknowledge the racist behaviour involved in Cronulla. Rather, the extract portrays Lebanese people as unable to take on 'Australian values' (or 'broadly accepted norms') and thus unable to be included in the term 'Australian'. This implies that the cause of the violence at Cronulla was the apparent lack of effort on the behalf of the Lebanese people to integrate into Australia. The extract also maintained that if Lebanese people conformed to certain norms then the 'intolerance' seen at Cronulla would not be manifested.

Discussion

As can be seen from the brief analysis of these two extracts, the contribution of racism to the Cronulla riots and in Australia more broadly was either explicitly or implicitly denied in the press following the riots, with the violence associated with the riots frequently being blamed on other factors. If violence among white Australians was acknowledged, the behaviour was often excused through recourse to the supposition that the blame lay with Lebanese Muslim people because of their apparent lack of conformity to 'Australian' norms and disregard of 'Australian' values. Such justifications thus tended to produce a denial of racism, as any admission of racist attitudes was constructed as being deserved.

As discussed, the violence seen at the Cronulla riots was explained in the press by reference to Australian values and a concept of belonging in Australia. Whilst the behaviour of the white Australians involved may not necessarily have been altogether excused in the media (although in many cases it was), it was nevertheless still constructed as the result of a minority group not assimilating into the dominant Australian culture, rather than a level of tension between cultures. The extracts also frequently assumed that if Lebanese people had conformed to the expectations of white Australians then the riots would never have occurred. In other words the violence of white Australians at Cronulla is mitigated because they were only reacting to the supposed negative behaviour of another cultural group.

If racism was acknowledged at all it was relegated to a specific place (such as Cronulla) or to a specific group of people (such as 'Hooligans'), and was not considered to be a problem affecting ordinary people in their day to day life. Once again this effectively meant that racism was not deemed to be an underlying issue in Australia, and was relegated only to the more extreme fringes of society. As Van Dijk states, this denial of racism on an everyday level means that claims of racism are ignored and, furthermore, that such denials effectively justify acts which could be seen to be racist by not acknowledging them as such. Thus racism is reproduced by further alienating minority cultural groups (Van Dijk, 1992). As such, the denial of racism in the press following the riots serves to legitimize white group dominance, and to therefore assert white values and white ownership of the national space.

The discourses surrounding Cronulla that appeared in the press, whilst not necessarily reflective of individuals' attitudes, do provide individuals with ways of interpreting events which they have no direct access to themselves. Given this, the discourses analysed in this paper, and which frequently appeared in the printed press following the riots, provide the public with ways of interpreting the Cronulla riots in terms of considerations of Australian values and how to be seen to belong in Australia, whilst not necessarily taking into account race relations.

The analysis of these extracts focused on the use of discourses concerning Australian values and belonging and the way these constructs were used to mitigate the racist elements of the riots. However there were many other factors which were also evident in relation to the riots and which were discussed in the media. These include issues such as gender inequalities (for example the way in which discourses concerning 'our women' were frequently used by both the white Australians and the Lebanese people who were involved), religion, and discussions around Australian icons such as surf lifesavers. Due to the constraints of this paper these other factors

were not discussed in any detail, but are nevertheless important considerations when considering events like Cronulla and race relations in Australia more broadly.

As we continue to see (for example in John Howard's recent praise of Greek communities for 'adequately assimilating'), Australia is often constructed as a 'good nation' that is willing to accept those who come to its shores. Yet such constructions fail to adequately demonstrate the claims of a 'virtuous nation', when asylum seekers continue to be denied visas, when communities such as Lebanese Muslims are accused of 'failing to integrate', and when white Australia continues to deny Indigenous sovereignty rights. Focusing on the wide range of ways in which racism is played out within and on behalf of the white nation may help to illustrate why constructions of the 'good nation' are so desperately held on to - they are used to mitigate the reality of racial violence since colonisation, and thus to legitimate the claims to belonging made by white Australians. Refuting Howard's claims to a 'good nation' thus requires the ongoing analysis of the ways in which racism is enacted both on a daily basis through institutional norms and their enshrining of white race privilege, and in specific acts of violence such as those at Cronulla.

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