

Nation, Migration and the City: Mediating Urban Citizenship

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One of the crucial differences between the nation and the city is the way they figure as representable imagined totalities. Nations are the common cultural appendages of that dominant geopolitical entity of the modern world, the nation-state, whose privileged existence is founded on the principles of territorial sovereignty, self-determination and internal autonomy. As such, nations are commonly thought of as bounded, sovereign collective subjects whose right to independence is beyond doubt. It is on behalf of the nation’s way of life, identity and security that nation-states engage in patrolling, defending and controlling their boundaries – in what in recent Australian history has come to be dubbed ‘border protection’. In this country, the drama of national sovereignty reached a climax in August 2001, when a Norwegian ship, the Tampa, with 400 Middle Eastern asylum seekers on board, was not allowed to land on Australian territory. (For an account, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MV_Tampa) Stirring up the prospect of a flood of unwanted ‘boat people’ seeking entry into the country through unauthorised means, Prime Minister John Howard (in)famously declared: ‘*We determine who comes into this country and the manner in which they enter!*’ This is militant and self-righteous language that asserts the nation-state’s sovereign power as the power to exclude. The Tampa incident resonated internationally and was widely denounced by critics as a shameful sign of the Australian government’s lack of compassion for the plight of refugees, but in literal terms Howard’s statement – repeated endlessly in the media – is nothing more than an insistent articulation of the continuing cultural power of the national(ist) imagination in today’s globalised world. *Every* nation-state in principle insists on its fundamental right to circumscribe the limits of belonging, thus

exposing the unkindness towards strangers that is *by definition* an element of *any* national identity and nationalist discourse. (Anderson 1991)

Not so for cities. Unlike the nation-state the city cannot, in general, declare the closure of its borders. A city does not have control over who gets in or out, at least not in any formal sense; it simply has to accommodate new arrivals as best as it can. Moreover, while cities – especially so-called global cities – are increasingly seen as actors of their own, they cannot normally bypass the nation-state within which they are embedded; the latter still circumscribes the regulatory framework and the institutionalised backdrop within which cities – no matter how global – have to operate. Matters of international migration are a case in point. Policies that determine the rules for the immigration and settlement of national outsiders are the jurisdiction of nation-states, not individual cities. In Australia, which as a settler society has one of the world's most well-developed immigration programs since World War Two, rules and procedures for who and how many immigrants might be accepted into the country are determined nation-wide by the Federal Government; a global city such as Sydney – the largest city in the nation-state of Australia – does not have a say in these numbers, even though it is in cities such as Sydney where the concrete impact of new migrants is generally most directly felt. As James Holston and Arjun Appadurai put it (1999: 10), 'Immigration politics cannot be abstractly conducted evenly across all national space. It tends to be implosive (...), and its most intense points of implosion are cities'.

Bob Carr, who was the Premier of New South Wales from 1995 to 2005, repeatedly criticised the Federal Government for its policy of high immigration intake, complaining that Sydney was already bursting out of its seams. He pointed out that the city had to bear the brunt disproportionately from increased migration, because it was the most popular destination for immigrants entering Australia. Carr referred to problems of urban sprawl, a stressed housing market, and pressure on the city's infrastructure to argue that Sydney cannot cope with the population growth resulting from immigration. As he argued in a radio interview: 'if the Federal Government continues to force-feed an increased annual migrant intake into the Sydney Basin you get more growth at the fringes but you also get more intense development in our suburbs. I'm not happy with that and I think the bulk of people in Sydney are not happy with that.' ('Carr seeks solution to Sydney's population problem', PM – ABC Radio National, 25 November 2002).

Nevertheless, there is no way for the city's rulers to stop the newcomers at the gate; the city has no choice but to absorb them within the density of its urban structures and communities. Indeed, as with most world cities Sydney continues to expand beyond its seams, with the accretion of new suburban developments continuously adding to the space of 'Sydney' at its outskirts. In short, the city's boundaries are porous and stretchy, its territorial identity pliable and spongy.

To put it differently, unlike nation-states cities do not have sovereign power over their territory or its borders: Bob Carr could not determine who comes into his city and the manner in which they enter. As a consequence, the way the city operates as an imagined totality – a unitary entity – in the minds of its citizens is rather different from that of the nation. The nation is generally represented as a Subject with a big S, and its story is mostly told in the genre of the epic, articulated in the elevated heroism that constitutes the central focus of official National Histories everywhere. Narratives of the urban, however, rarely take on epic proportions, and if they do, it is usually under exceptional circumstances, for example, when a city has overcome a major disaster (eg an earthquake or a terrorist attack) or becomes the focal point of a great Event. Thus, the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games – celebrated by some pundits as 'the best Olympics ever' – still lives on in the memories of many Sydneysiders as one such epic moment in the city's history. However, such peak moments of urban pride are short-lived interruptions in the way cities are usually experienced: more generally, I would

suggest, it is the city's quality *as lived physical and social space* that tends to dominate its representation. That is, while nations are *abstract* imagined communities as Benedict Anderson (1991) has theorised it, and can acquire epic status in the minds of their citizens precisely because of that idealised abstraction, cities are too concrete realities (in both senses of the word 'concrete') for such imagined totalisation and objectification to work in any sustained sense. In other words, what distinguishes the city from the nation as imaginary constructs is that the former is much more defined by the dynamic concreteness of life in the city as a space – or more precisely, as a multiplicity of spaces – of dwelling, work, travel and play. In this sense, as Sherry Simon (2006) has noted, quoting the Quebec critic Francois Hebert, 'the nation is an epic, the city is a novel', although we might just as well allude to the more mundane, popular genre of the soap opera to describe the heterogeneity of city life: a rambling soap opera of parallel and criss-crossing stories featuring many characters engaging in myriad activities and practices in countless locations and transit points.

The city, then, resists being represented as a unified, bounded or coherent entity – physically, symbolically or socially. Sydney is vast, sprawling and decentred, with no spatial centre for the activities and experiences of its more than four million inhabitants. While Sydney is not a divided city, as is, for example, Montreal (Simon 2006), how and what the city represents for these inhabitants depends greatly on where they dwell. The constant influx of new, often dispossessed migrants who wish to make a new life in the social and cultural fabric of the city is generally experienced in localities far removed from the city's CBD or the more wealthy Eastern suburbs. For example, in some municipalities of the vast western suburbs of Sydney, more than 50% now are born overseas. In Fairfield, Auburn, Bankstown or Blacktown, some of the most diverse areas in Western Sydney – more than an hour away from the glamour of the Opera House and the world-renowned Harbour - people living there come from more than 130 countries and speak more than 70 languages at home, and in each locality the particular mix of people creates quite unique urban realities that are very far away from the idealised imagined community of the sovereign Australian nation.

In this condition, shoring up the rules for formal citizenship is not enough to enhance migrant 'integration', which is such a key concern for many Western national governments today. For example, during 2006 the Australian government announced its intention to tighten the rules for gaining Australian citizenship, requiring migrants to pass an English language and Australian values test before they can call themselves Australians (Australian Government, 2006). In the contemporary global city, however, which is already the home of millions of inhabitants of a huge range of backgrounds, such assimilationist discourses – based as they are on a homogenising concept of nationness – cannot be upheld in the face of the heterogeneity of urban social reality. Here, meaningful citizenship cannot be severed from the differentiated, spatially-specific socio-cultural practices through which it is enacted. As Joe Painter and Chris Philo (1995: 115) point out, 'if citizenship is to mean anything at all in an everyday sense it should mean the ability of individuals to occupy public spaces in a manner that does not compromise their self-identity, let alone obstruct, threaten or even harm them more materially'. In other words, while national citizenship is generally defined in terms of a formal demarcation of national belonging (such as the possession of a passport and the ability to vote), urban citizenship - that is, the right to belong to the city – cannot rely on one-dimensional and homogeneous notions of 'home' or imagined community but depends on the practical recognition of the internal plurality and diversity of forms of life that inhabit the spaces of the city. That is, while national citizenship is governed primarily by a politics of representation (ie of laws, meanings, symbols, discourse, tests), urban citizenship, which centres around the everyday, pragmatic and affective dimensions of 'rights to the city', is, as several cultural geographers have pointed out, centrally about a politics of presence (Amin and Thrift, 2003).

The so-called ‘Cronulla riots’ in Sydney in December 2005, named after the suburb where it took place, provide a vivid example of the tensions between formal (national) citizenship and substantive (urban) citizenship, and the role of the media in mediating the complex entanglement of national imagination and urban social reality in the negotiation of migration and difference in the global city.

The beachside suburb of Cronulla is part of the Sutherland Shire, which is well-known as one of the city’s most white, Anglo areas, with a thriving beach culture that is governed by cultural practices that are typical of white Australian modes of enjoying the beach: surfing, women sunbathing in bikinis, drinking in pubs. Unlike other Sydney beach suburbs, which are only approachable by road, Cronulla is at the endpoint of a city train line. As a consequence, many people from other parts of Sydney are regular visitors, especially during weekends to enjoy sea, sun and sand – one of Australia’s favourite pastimes. Thus, many migrant families from Western Sydney often come to enjoy picnics together in one of the parks surrounding the beach town. For many years Cronulla beach has also been frequented by groups of 2nd and 3rd generation migrant youth of Middle Eastern, mainly Lebanese backgrounds, who have their own ways of enjoying the beach, for example, playing soccer rather than surfing.

These divergent uses of the beach have led to tensions between locals and visitors. There have been reports of regular instances of harassment and intimidation between the two groups, much of it focusing on gender politics. For example, many (white) female beach goers have complained about aggressive approaches by men of Middle Eastern backgrounds (Lattas, 2006) At the same time, the surf culture of local Anglo males is well-known for its hostility towards outsiders and an exclusivist sense of ownership of the beach, evidenced by practices such as expressing racist taunts, loud and possessive behaviour, and so on (Evers, 2005). On Sunday [4 December 2005](#), a group of male youths of Lebanese descent were playing [soccer](#) on a Cronulla beach when a group of North Cronulla [surf lifesavers](#) reportedly asked them to stop, as it was disturbing other users of the beach. Apparently, some insults were exchanged, with the lifesavers publicly taunting the Lebanese youths that ‘Lebs can’t swim’, after which two of the young lifesavers were brutally bashed.

A week later, on Sunday, [December 11, 2005](#), approximately 5000 people gathered in a protest to "reclaim the beach". Interestingly, and here the role of the media comes into play, the mobilisation of the crowd was instigated by the spread of an SMS text message, which read as follows:

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 lets show them that this is our beach. Let’s claim back the Shire.

The crowd quickly turned violent, as people commonly described in Australian media discourse as ‘of Middle Eastern appearance’ were assaulted and attacked. Several people fleeing the mobs had to be rescued by police. The day’s events became a national top news story, and a rare case when an Australian incident became a news item internationally as well. The next night, groups of young men of Middle Eastern backgrounds conducted retaliation attacks by entering Cronulla and neighbouring suburbs in a large convoy of cars, smashing shops and cars and assaulting locals. In the days and weeks afterwards, as the city was reeling after what has been called the worst race riots ever in Australia, the authorities established a firm law and order regime, which lasted throughout the summer (this being summer time in Australia), to prevent further breakout of violence, which, indeed, didn’t happen, although minor scuffles remain a regular occurrence. (For an account of the riots, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cronulla_riots)

The 'Cronulla riots' have quickly become a key marker in Australian public debate about immigration, multiculturalism and national identity, indeed, an epic moment in the symbolic politics of national representation. The (extremist) Right has generally emphasised the right of 'locals' to stand up for themselves, stressing the threat posed by the invasion of (foreign) Lebanese youth on the local 'Aussie' culture, as is demonstrated by the many Australian flags waved during the riots, and the display of divisive slogans such as '100% Aussie Pride', 'We grew here, you flew here' and 'Locals only'. Many participants also had 2230 written on their arms, signifying Cronulla's postcode. While these were clear expressions of anti-migrant, nationalist localism, most right-wing commentators blamed alcohol and youthful bravado, rather than xenophobic attitudes, for the violence. Prime Minister Howard, for example, while condemning the riots, refused to say that Australia was a racist nation ('PM refuses to use racist tag' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 December 2005). Moreover, the revenge attacks on the night after provided further proof for the Right that the fight against the 'Lebs' was justified because the latter were a violent lot. In other words, the Right's perspective was underpinned by mapping an insular and righteous localism onto an essentialist cultural nationalism, founded on a discourse of 'Australianness' from which non-white, culturally different migrants were explicitly excluded. Indeed, in a direct echo of the Prime Minister's incantation a few years earlier, in the wake of the Tampa affair, that 'We will determine who comes into this country and the manner in which they enter', several cartoonists have pointedly used the same phrase to highlight the racism of the riots: 'We will decide who comes to Cronulla and the circumstances etc'. (Bill Leak in *The Australian*, 12 Dec 2005)

But unlike the sovereign nation-state, a local suburb does not have the legal means to close its borders. Indeed, despite assertions by locals that the beach is 'our' beach, the beach is officially *public* urban space that is in principle open for use by all citizens: all inhabitants of the city can claim the right to use it. That is, while the locals can *represent* the non-local, non-Anglo visitors as 'un-Australian', they cannot prevent their *presence* (except by illegal violence or intimidation). Indeed, their very presence in the city – or more specifically in this case, on the beach – is a sharp and undeniable reminder of the much-discussed erosion of the nation-state's control over its own borders, sovereignty and exclusionary identity in the age of globalisation, even though the discourse of the national continues to have a hold on people's understandings of their world. At the same time, a national(ist) framework is insufficient, if not inadequate to explain why, almost immediately after the riots, people of all sorts of backgrounds have scrambled for ways to defuse the antagonism – for this, we need to shift to the material level of the urban everyday, and to the spatial politics of presence.

First, however, let me briefly describe the Left's response to the riots. Not surprisingly, for the Left it was indisputable that the riots were racist: for them, it was precisely the white racism of the Shire residents that deserved moral outrage and denunciation. The revenge attacks, from this point of view, drew much less attention: in the Left narrative Middle Eastern youth were generally cast as the victims of racism and prejudice, not as active perpetrators of violence in their own right. In the Left discourse, the media loomed large as key culprits in the whole affair. And indeed, much has been made in post-riot commentary of the inflammatory role played by some media, especially talk back radio, in whipping up local anger in the days before the riots broke. The SMS message I quoted above was published in the popular daily the *Daily Telegraph* and read out by right-wing talk show host Alan Jones during his morning programme on 2GB radio station, and in the days before the riots sensationalist headlines and articles did much to heighten the expectation that a 'community show of force', as one radio presenter called it, was imminent in the coming weekend. This was, then, a classic example of a spiral of signification that turned the tension into a full-blown 'moral panic', where the 'Lebs' were publicly vilified and constructed as the proverbial

'folk devils'. The media indeed played a major role in the amplification of the conflict, as has been confirmed by a recent official enquiry into the riot. (Clennell 2006)

Originally coined by Stanley Cohen (1972), the term 'moral panic' has entered into general public discourse in the past few decades, and it refers broadly to the heightened public perception, whipped up by sensationalist media coverage, that some individual or group, frequently a minority group or a subculture, poses a menace to society, provoking a violent or hysterical backlash with prejudicial overtones. In essence, the process of moral panic formation involves the mediation of a morally strident defense of 'us' against 'them'. Certainly, the dubious role of the media in the build up of the Cronulla riots is undeniable, for which the theory of 'moral panics' provides a neat explanatory model. But there are problems with the extent to which the theory of 'moral panics' has become a standard paradigm among Left academics to make sense of events such as these (see eg Poynting 2006). What the adoption of this explanatory paradigm achieves is an inversion of the process of othering: the folk devils targeted by the moral panic – the 'Lebs' – are fiercely defended against those whom from the Left's point of view were the real culprits, the true 'others': the white racists of Cronulla (who thus easily become the folk devils of a competing moral panic). In other words, the sharp moral divide between 'us' and 'them' is not overcome, but merely turned around. Moreover, as moral panic theory has become a routine interpretive formula for 'blaming the media', its critical purchase, in political and intellectual terms, tends to be diminished. That is, by being so preoccupied with the (negative) role of excessive media coverage (without, incidentally, due regard for the structural conditions under which media industries operate in late capitalist societies), too much focus of the political response is directed at denouncing the violence of representation – the flare up of the 'moral panic' – rather than critiquing and understanding the violence on the streets (or the beach) itself. 'Cronulla' was interpreted one-dimensionally as the unpalatable demonstration of Australian racism (which the media are accused of nurturing and legitimising), at the expense of a more complex understanding of it as a contestation over a scarce urban resource – the beach – which turned ugly. In short, moral panic theory reinforces a reductionist framework in Left intellectual discourse 'where any and every "irruption" of intercultural tension is taken as the national rising of the racist unconscious'. (Burchell, 2006: 7).

A different way of making this point is that the emphasis on representation tends to cast 'Cronulla' as a national rather than an urban event. Focusing on the *national* dimension of the event draws our attention to the crucial role of the politics of representation in the management of intercultural tension: what is at stake then, simply put, is the struggle over who is and is not allowed to count as Australian – as part of 'us'. During their revenge attacks one of the Lebanese youth reportedly bashed an elderly white woman shouting 'I am an Australian too' (seen on TV news). Of course, this is a claim of national citizenship, whose legitimacy – at the level of formal representation – is readily recognised by the nation-state. In this paradigm, the conflict is cast as one between an exclusionary, white racist version of national citizenship and resistance against such exclusion. Indeed, in the aftermath of the riots even the mainstream media have represented the racist undertones of the violence as unacceptable to the nation's self-image: 'Cronulla', here, becomes the epic, anti-climactic moment of national shame. As one editorial dramatically put it, 'Our Disgrace –Cronulla riot that shames Australia's values' (*Daily Telegraph*, 12 Dec 2005).

What such a national paradigm cannot address, however, are the visceral, micropolitical tensions that emanate not from the representation of the other (racist or otherwise), but from the very tangible, embodied presence of multiple others as they move within shared *urban* space. These others are not simply 'victims', but active social agents with their own space-claiming practices, which may be more or less antagonistic towards others. The problem posed by the riots for city dwellers (rather the national citizens) was not how it reflected badly

on the city's reputation, but how the antagonisms can be handled to enable more peaceful modes of actually sharing space. This requires intervention at the mundane level of practices and processes that can change everyday routines and lived experience. And this is indeed what has happened in the aftermath of the riots, with a range of community groups developing a host of initiatives to prevent a repeat of the violence. Some of the most interesting examples are perhaps an initiative of the Cronulla lifesavers club to recruit young people of Middle Eastern backgrounds to become lifesavers – that is, a strategy of ‘multiculturalisation’ of what has been an iconic Anglo-Australian cultural practice. As summer was approaching again almost a year after the riots, a Welcome Back to Summer party was held at the North Cronulla Surf club, organised by Sutherland Shire Baptist Minister the Reverend George Capsis, ‘aimed at promoting kindness, goodness and harmony’ (*The Sun-Herald*, 8 Oct 2006). Also on the agenda is the Making Waves Out of Our Zone Cronulla Youth Project, targeting young people of the two antagonistic groups to engage in ‘trust building activities and non-violence training’. (ibid)

One can see such on-the-ground community initiatives as interventions in a politics of presence that do not amount to an epic climax of peaceful resolution but are episodes in the ongoing, multifaceted and fragmented soap opera story of city life. What is at stake in the politics of presence is the negotiation of different interests, clashing perspectives and overlapping or contrasting desires among those who find themselves on the same turf: it is a politics that has to overcome the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ simply because the alternative would be repeating violence and continuing tension. This accords with Michael Keith’s astute observation that ‘the sites of the city that display the most intense forms of intolerance are commonly also those that demonstrate the potential for the most intimate forms of cultural dialogue’ (2005: 15). And although these initiatives tend to be framed in the language of tolerance, respect, reconciliation, and the need to accept that living with diversity and sharing space with others is a common feature of contemporary urban life, it is clear that there are no quick fixes to the power plays that are built into the struggle for urban citizenship in complex multicultural societies. The negotiation is an ongoing process, an unending narrative of ups and downs – just like a soap opera.

It is fascinating to consider relevant media coverage on this matter as a rendition of this urban soap opera, and it gives us a sense that the media are not just conduits for moral panics, but also for moral sentimentality (which is of course typical of the soap opera genre), with an abiding predilection for highlighting utopian moments of harmony, alternated by episodes of tension and threat that undercut the desire for harmony. For example, on 8 October 2006 the *Sun-Herald* featured a photo on its front page of a few happy-looking young men on Cronulla beach with the caption ‘Getting back to the beach’, accompanying this happy-ending story: ‘Cronulla has been the beach of choice for teenagers from Sydney’s Lebanese community. But since last summer’s race riots they had been too afraid to return. In a sign the racial strife has settled, the youngsters are going back to the beach for the first time.’



NO FEAR: (from left) Chris Boutros, Mark Younan, Elie El-Jammal and Mike Mahoney at Cronulla yesterday.

Picture: ADAM HOLLINGWORTH

■ GETTING BACK TO THE BEACH

Cronulla has long been the beach of choice for teenagers from Sydney's Lebanese community. But since last summer's race riots they had

been too afraid to return. In a sign the racial strife has settled, the youngsters are going back to the beach for the first time.

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That such moments of happy harmony are not everlasting, however, is suggested by a contradicting story in the Sydney Morning Herald about a week later with the title 'Sun, sea and slurs: racism revisits our beaches' (October 16, 2006), which featured a photograph of a Cronulla beach scene with two patrolling policemen on horses, ready 'to crack down on troublemakers this summer'.

Sun, sea and slurs: racism revisits our beaches



Bay watch ... a mounted patrol at Cronulla yesterday as NSW Police announced new measures to crack down on troublemakers this summer. Photos: Ben Rushton

In conclusion, I would simply like to quote Ash Amin, who, writing in the aftermath of the urban riots in Britain in 2001, argued that a politics of presence should aim to be 'capable of supporting plural and conflicting claims and that is ready to negotiate diversity through a vigorous but democratic clash among equals' (Amin 2003: 463). But such a politics cannot be easily resolved by invocations of 'community cohesion' and 'harmony', as is too often the case: the plural and conflicting claims involved are too real to be papered over by some easy narrative of reconciliation. Amin suggests that what is at stake is 'the culture of the public domain – whether it is capable of sustaining plural demands without prejudice'.

To translate, what is at stake after the Cronulla riots is how multiple beach cultures can co-exist and be co-present without being subsumed under some homogenising/ hegemonising representation of 'our' beach, founded as it is on an implicit universalisation of the dominant national, 'Aussie' culture. Thus, the politics of presence and the politics of representation are inextricably entangled, for people's experience of society is always mediated by representations of that society. (Peters, 1997) It is in this sense that the media play a crucial brokering role between presence and representation, between physical propinquity and the production of symbolic, imagined community. As such, urban citizenship cannot, as yet, cut itself loose entirely from national citizenship.

While concepts of national citizenship are delimited in absolutist terms of inclusion and exclusion, urban citizenship encompasses the process of *living* with difference, rather than its negation, handling actual heterogeneity rather than imposing imaginary homogeneity or commonality: it involves daily and ongoing contestations over the sharing of space and place; the coordination and management of 'the simultaneity of modern social identities in highly differentiated societies' (Holston & Appadurai 1999: 9). Moreover, insofar as the life of the nation is increasingly lived out precisely in cities, contestations over urban citizenship have the tendency to undermine the illusory, imagined homogenisations of national citizenship. At

the same time, urban citizenship cannot be thought of autonomously from national citizenship because the symbolic spectre of the national always informs the substantive realities of the urban: whether we like it or not, the global city of Sydney cannot be separated from the nation-state of Australia. The beach goers at Cronulla know this all too well.

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