

***Cronulla n’est pas Clichy-sous-Bois:* On the Limits of Comparison**

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Introduction

In November and December of 2005, riots occurred in the French *banlieues* and in two beachside suburbs of Sydney, Australia (Cronulla and Maroubra). These were both highly mediated events, the first in its unfolding organisation and representation and the second also in the role of talk radio and newspapers in whipping up the frenzy that would lead five thousand white youth to attack men of Middle Eastern appearance at Cronulla Beach on 11 December.

In both cases, the role of media must be analysed in complex relation to urban conditions and global flows. The circulation of similar images (cars burned or smashed in the streets) may be one reason for the rapid proliferation of comparisons between these events. But what are the force and possibility of such comparisons? And how might they function to produce new knowledge rather than as mere catalogues of similarities and differences?

There are three main aims:

1. To outline a description of the social thickness and specificity of the various dimensions and intersections by which these events link the cultural complexity of the contemporary city to the workings of media.
2. To ask what thinking these events together reveals about the possibilities for comparison at a time when local, national and global orders intersect and overlap in complex ways.
3. To suggest that the most important link between these events is the emergence of a new kind of political actor that poses serious challenges to liberal and national regimes of cultural integration.

Methods

The study employs the multi-methodological techniques of qualitative cultural research. There are three stages to the data collection and analysis:

1. Collection of materials associated with each event, including media texts across a variety of platforms (newspaper articles, television news reports, blog posts, etc.), images, ethnographic interviews conducted by other researchers, academic and activist commentary.
2. Critical discourse analysis of above with the aim of locating instabilities within and tensions between these texts. An important element of this analysis is contextualisation to gain an understanding of the concrete and virtual environments in which these events take place and interact.
3. Application of cultural and political theories concerning globalisation, citizenship and media to deliver nuanced analysis of the dynamic processes of interaction between the events and their significance for rethinking the operations of power, domination, resistance and unsettlement

Discussion

As a result of the methods described above, the following issues were identified as relevant for understanding the complex intersections between the events.

1. The need to develop a list of differences between the events, not as a critical analysis in itself but to provide a compass for such an analysis.

France	Sydney
French republican universalism—e.g., law on veil	Australian multiculturalism as official policy
Trigger event was death of two youths in power substation in Clichy-sous-Bois after police pursuit	Riots and counter-riots after beach altercation between life guards and football players
Media coverage emphasizes race/ethnicity rather than social conditions	Role of media in encouraging anti-Muslim riot, organisation with mobile phones
Some feminist criticism of left celebration of <i>banlieuesards</i>	Participation of white women in anti-Muslim riot
Four weeks duration	Five days
Spreads to other French cities but always confined to <i>banlieues</i>	Confined to Sydney, but riots take place in wealthy, predominantly white suburbs
Interior Minister Sarkozy calls rioters ‘scum’	Prime Minister Howard: ‘I do not believe Australians are racists’
State of emergency declared in <i>banlieues</i> using law dating from colonial period in Algeria	NSW parliament legislates to allow police to ‘lockdown’ suburbs, in some ways an extension of anti-terrorism legislation
French precarity movement—March 2006	No organisation around precarity despite passage of new industrial relations legislation
French troops to Lebanon—August 2006	Delay in evacuating Australian citizens from Beirut

2. There is a complex tangle of race, gender and economic conditions (including the lack of a political response to the crisis of Fordism) in the brewing of these events. An analysis that seeks to highlight one factor at the expense of the others is inadequate (this is often the case in both mainstream media and critical academic or activist analyses, although the former tend to play up the issue of security). There is a need to consider their ‘intersectionality’ (Williams 1994) in relation to the transformations of urban space.
3. There is a crisis in comparative studies due to emphasis on global interconnectedness in cultural theory (Harootunian 2005). One possible solution is to argue that global processes are also internal to the nation (Sassen 2006), although this leaves the challenge of comparing overlapping and intersecting entities. Media flows are a key element of this complexity and are certainly relevant to the comparison at hand.
4. The debate about these events cannot be entirely structured by concurrent debates about migration and border control. In both cases, the actors are not migrants (at least not recently so) but citizens whose exclusion from certain urban spaces (while it may entail certain technologies of internal border control—e.g., the lockdown) is not accomplished solely by juridical means.
5. In both cases, the violent action reveals the equally violent delimitation of citizenship in the liberal nation-state. The riots are not a struggle for recognition or ascension to fully-integrated cultural citizenship. Rather they involve the explosion into the political of supposedly apolitical actors. This entry entails the suspension of citizenship or, more precisely, the legal disarticulation of citizenship from rights (Farred 2006). At stake is not simply the ‘state of exception’, which operates by a binary logic allowing either the full rule of law or the complete stripping of rights (Ong 2006).

Conclusions

1. The global interconnectedness of these two highly mediated events at once mitigates against their comparison and provides the only interpretative horizon on which such a comparison might make sense.
2. What binds the rioters in France and Sydney together is the institution of a new political figure, neither completely citizen nor completely foreigner. More often characterised by dormancy, this actor interrupts the political sporadically to struggle against its own disenfranchisement. In so doing, it exposes the internal incompatibility of liberal ideals of multicultural ‘integration’ and modern nation-state structures.

References

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