

Prolonged Liminality and Comparative Examples of Rioting 'Down Under'

Omid Tofghian

'We simply don't behave that way in Australia.'

The 2011 riots involving asylum seekers in Australian immigration detention centres on Christmas Island and in Villawood invoked an overwhelmingly negative response from almost all facets of Australian society. First of all, many members of the community felt that detainees were unjustified in their actions and ungrateful towards the country that has provided them with shelter. Second, the general feeling amongst the general public ranged from disapproval to disgust at what they perceived to be disrespectful, destructive and criminal behavior. In other words, the small groups within the detention population that engaged in the rioting acted in ways that the majority of Australians believed to be frightening, unwelcome and 'un-Australian'. Even less hostile individuals, who at times sympathise with refugees, felt that expressing frustration in such a confronting and provocative way was out of line with 'normal' Australian habits and associate the uprisings with what they perceive to be a vastly different society and culture, i.e. the customs and methods that detainees were raised under and accustomed to. Essentially, the Christmas Island and Villawood protests and riots have been interpreted using a certain paradigm. The paradigm involves an understanding of fundamental Australian values as being rational, patient and respectful of a process that acknowledges law and human rights. In contrast, the reaction of asylum seekers has been rendered as the complete opposite, i.e. irrational, impatient, and disrespectful of law and order.

This study challenges the above evaluative paradigm by analyzing the phenomenon of rioting in the context of specific events in Australian history. My aim is to draw attention to various instances

of rioting in Australian society and show that they must be recognised as disconcerting, yet formative, phases in Australia's social and political past. My choice of these particular events is intended to unsettle the preconception that Australian cultural identity is essentially constituted by a set of ideal values including fairness, equality and order. My intention for considering selected examples of rioting is to encourage a more critical approach towards the different ways Australians express their frustrations, i.e. understanding the complex conditions that give rise to riots and whether their role in Australian history challenges the dichotomy of 'Australian' and 'un-Australian' values. The riots I will address are in chronological order:

1. anti-Chinese riots
2. examples of rioting Diggers
3. the Redfern and Palm Island riots
4. the Macquarie Fields riots and
5. the Cronulla riots.

Also, I will illuminate the fundamental differences between Australia's past riots and the recent riots in immigration detention centres by arguing that the reaction of asylum seekers is linked to a peculiar and precarious form of liminality – what I have termed prolonged liminality.¹

1 The Redfern and Palm Island riots in particular and, in a different way, the Macquarie Fields riots must be understood in relation to marginality and therefore have the potential to be interpreted in relation to the concept of liminality (one must take into account essential factors such as Aboriginality and low socio-economic status respectively). However I will explain how specific features of the detention centre riots such as confined spaces, undetermined periods of incarceration and the power dynamics between immigration policy, centre staff and detainees places their liminal state in a separate category (a forced prolonged state of liminality).

Anti-Chinese Riots—The Law and the Lawless During Colonial Times

During the middle of the nineteenth century Chinese immigrants who had come to Australia to mine for gold were the victims of violent and racist rioting at the hands of Europeans and Americans. The impetus for these attacks, primarily in Victoria and New South Wales, appears to have been resentment of the success of Chinese miners. Also, the Chinese, who happened to be the largest non-British and non-Christian group on the digging fields, attracted hatred due to their growing presence on the fields and because of physical and cultural differences. Non-Chinese diggers gathered in large numbers and attempted to drive Chinese diggers off the land using physical force, intimidation and vandalism. Rioting in order to eradicate the Chinese, or 'roll ups' as Europeans called them, was difficult to control by the Colonial authorities and often the punishment was light or overturned due to large-scale resistance. The incidents of violence against Chinese diggers that took place at the Buckland River diggings in Victoria in 1857, Lambing Flat in NSW in 1861 and in Brisbane on election day in 1888² represent both racial discrimination amongst non-Chinese diggers and the xenophobia that existed within the colonial system. For instance, taxes were introduced on sea vessels arriving in Australia that carried Chinese people and the colonies introduced harsh restrictions to limit Chinese immigration (a predecessor to the White Australia Policy of 1901).³

it was on the goldfields, at Eureka, that Australians supposedly fought and died

2 Raymond Evans, 'Night of Broken Glass – The Anatomy of an Anti-Chinese Riot', in *Australia to 1901: Selected Readings in the Making of a Nation*, eds. Martin Crotty and Erik Eklund (Croydon: Tertiary Press, 2003), pp. 315-328.

3 K. Corin, '“Get a Move upon the Pigtails”—Racial Conflict on the Mining Frontier' (1982), in *Australia to 1901: Selected Readings in the Making of a Nation*, eds. M. Crotty and E. Eklund (Croydon: Tertiary Press, 2003), pp. 252-253.

for democracy under the Southern Cross flag, though this is a simplistic myth widely questioned by historians.⁴

Law enforcement was not absent but was ineffective and prejudiced. The rights of Chinese diggers were disregarded by most non-Chinese diggers and, in most cases, by the authorities. Many aspects of colonial society and culture discriminated against Chinese immigrants and often vicious attempts to disrupt or destroy their dignity and livelihood were left unpunished and uncompensated by colonial authorities. Also, the extent of the cruelty they were subject to at the hands of mobs was quickly intensified because the fact that the Chinese were unable to defend themselves and their families.

Rioting Diggers—Liverpool 1916 and Brisbane 1942

During World War 1 many Australian volunteers were stationed at Sydney's Casula Camp in Liverpool to receive military training. On 14 February 1916, 5000 trainees refused an extension on the training session for that day and began to strike in protest against their treatment and the poor conditions of their camps. The protest march grew into 15,000 members who began rioting by invading hotels, drinking, refusing to pay and vandalising property. The rioters also hijacked trains headed for Sydney where they then terrorised anyone with a foreign-sounding name. They looted Italian restaurants and shops and soon a battle between police and soldiers erupted. When military guards found over 100 rioting soldiers destroying a toilet block at Central Railway Station they demanded that they surrender (The Battle of Central Station). A rioter fired a weapon over the guards' heads, to which the guards responded by shooting dead one rioter and injuring eight. Approximately 1000 soldiers were court-martialled; however, since troops

4 Martin Crotty and Erik Eklund, 'The Gold Rushes and the Chinese', in *Australia to 1901: Selected Readings in the Making of a Nation*, eds. Martin Crotty and Erik Eklund (Croydon: Tertiary Press, 2003), p. 247.

were needed to be sent to Europe many of them avoided punitive measures and the media were discouraged from reporting the incident in order not to tarnish the image of the diggers.⁵

While Australian troops prepared for the advancing Japanese forces that threatened their shores in 1942 they faced new social and cultural problems as a result of the over 100,000 American soldiers stationed in Australia to assist them. Due to higher salaries, access to otherwise unavailable American consumer goods, and sophistication in courting women, American troops attracted the jealousy of their Australian counterparts. In 1942 almost all of the American military was stationed in Queensland. On the evening of 26 November 1942, Australian soldiers organised an attack on the US PX (US military store on base) which resulted in a fracas involving 2000–4000 men from both sides known as the 'Battle of Brisbane'⁶ One Australian soldier was shot dead and a secret military enquiry into the circumstances of the riot ensued.

The 2004 Redfern and Palm Island Riots—Aboriginal Resistance

On the 14 February 2004 Aboriginal Australians expressed their anger and discontent against discrimination by gathering to grieve the death of seventeen-year-old T.J. Hickey and raise awareness of police brutality. Witnesses attest that Hickey was being pursued by police on his bicycle when he was clipped by the police car and flung onto a fence where he was impaled and killed. Police closed off Eveleigh St., a section of which relatives, family friends, and Redfern residents had been occupying and the crowd reacted by throwing objects and Molotov cocktails and lighting fires. The riot lasted till the early hours of the morning when police used

water hoses to disperse the crowd.⁷

After the 147th death of an Aboriginal in police custody since the 1990 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 400 Aboriginal residents on Palm Island began to riot. Mulrunji died in a police cell on 19 November 2004, after being arrested for being a public nuisance. One of his four broken ribs had ruptured his liver and spleen, causing an intra-abdominal haemorrhage.⁸ A week later a public meeting was held where the Council Chairwoman read the autopsy but did not state the cause of death. Anger and frustration at the lack of action taken against the arresting officer, in particular, and the police, in general, turned into a riot and the local courthouse, police station and police barracks were burnt down while police were forced to flee.⁹

The 2005 Macquarie Fields Riots – a Message from the Margins

Riots erupted in the low-income earning area of Macquarie Fields,¹⁰ Sydney, in 2005 after a police pursuit resulted in the death of two teenage passengers. On 25 February a stolen vehicle collided into a tree after a police chase. The twenty-year-old driver accused police of intentionally ramming the car and causing the accident. In what followed 300 residents protested by clashing with and injuring police by

5 Desert Column, <http://desert-column.phpbb3now.com/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=739>. Accessed on 26 May 2011.

6 Francis Gordon Clarke, *Australia – A Concise Political and Social History* (Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanich, 1989), pp. 258-259.

7 BBC, 'Sydney Riots Over Aborigine Death', <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3491299.stm>. Visited on 26/5/11.

8 T. Koch and A. Fraser, 'Police Run for Their Lives as Rioters Torch Buildings in a Tropical Island Rampage', *The Weekend Australian* (27 November 2004), p. 1.

9 For footage of the riots and commentary see ABC, 'Dramatic new footage of Palm Island riot.' <http://www.abc.net.au/news/video/2010/11/29/3079823.htm>. Visited on 26 May, 2011.

10 At the time of the riots the unemployment rate was twice the national average (11.3 percent); 1500 of 4600 homes were housing commission; many families were disadvantaged; and the style of urban planning (cul-de-sac streets) leaves many homes with little privacy.

throwing objects, including petrol bombs, and setting cars alight.¹¹ The riots lasted four nights and authorities were criticised for their inability to control the situation.

The 2005 Cronulla Riots—Race Relations and ‘Aussie’ Panic

In December 2006, Cronulla Beach was the scene of a conflict that exposed Australia’s brooding racial tensions and proved that the potential for confused, emotion-driven and essentially unjustified rioting exists in parts of contemporary Australian society.

Intimidated and frustrated by the presence of large groups of non-Anglo Australians (many of Lebanese descent) on Cronulla beaches, locals from North Cronulla, together with a large number of non-locals, rioted and attacked non-Anglo individuals and groups. The initial riot occurred on the 11 December and was followed by a number of retaliatory riots over subsequent nights. The predominant elements that characterised the riots can be classified into two categories: the first pertains to race relations and the second is associated with social and cultural trends.

Firstly, the riots reflected a strong ‘racial/ethnic’ element. The racial attacks on the beach and other locations targeted any person who fit the stereotypical description of a ‘Leb’ or ‘wog’. Rioters and supporters felt their actions were protecting ‘our way of life’ and ‘reclaiming the beach’ and used racial violence to promote cultural homogeneity. In addition, phrases such as ‘Aussie pride’ were expressed as a cover for ‘White pride’ while nationalist sentiment and loyalty to the flag were used to justify a form of racial bias.¹²

Also, racial tension and bias were manifested in the social and cultural trends influencing the debates leading up to and following the riots. For

instance, after the events prominent politicians attempted to downplay the racial factor and describe the disturbance not as a riot but as criminal behavior involving drunken thugs and gangs.¹³ In response to the riots, then Prime Minister John Howard did not brand the riots as racist but stated that he would never condemn anyone who expressed pride in the Australian flag. Interestingly, most commentary on the riots involved nationalist and ethnocentric interpretations of ‘Australian-ness’ and what it should exclude. Furthermore, prior to the event a weeklong talkback campaign was launched to ‘reclaim our beaches’ from ‘Lebanese gangs’ and defend the so-called ‘Australian way of life’ and ‘core values’, accompanied by similarly incendiary headlines in the Daily Telegraph.

Riots in Australian Immigration Detention Centres—Prolonged Liminality

As highlighted above, rioting ‘Down Under’ has occurred as a result of a wide range of different causes including fear, hatred, prejudice, marginalisation and discrimination. The circumstances that influenced each instance of rioting described above involved unique factors and conditions irreducible to a monolithic or homogenous interpretation of cultural values and principles. Similarly, the root causes that led to the 2011 riots on Christmas Island and in Villawood immigration detention centres are many, divergent and complex. However, I argue that the significance of the forced prolongation of the transitional phase endured by asylum seekers must be defined and analysed in the context of the riots. It is necessary to explore the concept of liminality as a feature associated with both long-term indeterminate detention and its potential to transform into psychological and physical deterioration and, ultimately, disturbance. I will argue that this element

11 Cf. Claire Mathie, ABC, “Transcript: Riot breaks out in Macquarie Fields”, <http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2005/s1312287.htm>. Accessed on 27/5/11.

12 Adam Jamrozik. *The Chains of Colonial Inheritance*, (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004), p. 204-206.

13 See M. Storm, “Rattling Multicultural Myths: The 2005 Cronulla Riots Expose Official Multiculturalism as a Broken Edifice”, *The Labor Tribune*. Retrieved 7 June 2009, from www.labortribune.net/ArticleHolder/CronullaandtheleftPt1/tabid/55/Default.aspx

distinguishes the detention centre uprisings from the other forms of rioting explained above and illuminates a factor that requires further recognition.

Liminality

The term 'liminality' was first used by Arnold van Gennep to refer to the period in a rite of passage or ritual. In this transitional phase change occurs in relation to place, state, social position and age.¹⁴ The concept was popularised by Victor Turner, who applied liminal themes to a variety of sociological and anthropological topics. For Turner, a liminal phase is an intervening period in the sequence of a ritual when the subject's status and qualities remain undefined. A number of important elements must be considered in relation to a liminal phase. First, the initiate undertaking the ritual discards the attributes of his or her previous state of being and awaits the emergence of an upcoming state. Second, one's social status is temporarily suspended. And the stability characteristic of mundane social structures is shattered. In fact, liminality can be contrasted with structure, i.e. the hierarchy-based social system (political-legal-economic) that conditions mundane life.

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.¹⁵

Turner explains that the ambiguity associated with liminality propagates a spectrum of profound symbols. Liminal symbolism is expressed in all forms of cultural phenomena and often represents death, imprisonment, pre-

natal or pre-birth states, invisibility, darkness, bisexuality, timelessness, wilderness and the eclipsed sun or moon. Liminal individuals are also represented as, likened to or equated to characters such as monsters, ascetics, certain animals and special mythological and divine figures.¹⁶ In addition, liminal personalities exemplify passivity, humility and a willingness to accept punishment. In interesting ways, these features play a crucial role in empowering the liminal person, people or other entity and provide possibilities for surviving the liminal phase and successfully reentering the social structure. Consequently, both the liminal individual and the structure they enter into benefit profusely from creative benefits and new energy when liminality is accommodated and interacted with. The positive dynamics between the initiate, the transitional phase and the status quo disrupt the socio-cultural structure but also provide opportunities for profoundly progressive transformation.¹⁷ 'It is especially in the freedom of liminality that new metaphors are born, revisions of the social structure are first attempted, and creative insights are developed and nurtured.'¹⁸

Prolonged Liminality

In terms of Turner's account of liminality and the liminal individual we have a relatively accurate description with which to understand the situation and identity of detained asylum seekers. First, the refugee experience can be mapped according to Turner's delineation of ritual phases, i.e. separation, liminality and reincorporation. The time spent in detention or the period during which one waits for asylum claims to be processed (community detention) share affinities with the state of limbo explained by Turner, especially in relation to different kinds

14 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process – Structure and Anti-Structure*. (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), p.94.

15 Turner (1969) p. 95.

16 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 253.

17 Turner (1969) pp. 110–111. Turner (1974) p. 265.

18 William Doty, *The Study of Myths and Rituals*, (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1986) pp. 91-92. Turner (1969) pp. 128-129.

of marginalised people and communities. For instance, asylum seekers in Australian detention centres are 'betwixt and between'¹⁹ in that they are, on the one hand, incarcerated without being sentenced by a state they do not belong to but that has accepted to protect them and treat them with dignity. On the other hand, they definitely cannot return to their home countries yet are uncertain of their destiny in Australia. In other words, ironically, they have been told that they have the right to seek asylum but are punished when they do; they are in Australia but are not part of the general social structure; and they must traverse from one structured state, through a stage of uncertainty, to another structured state. For asylum seekers the time in detention is like a rite of passage or, in Turner's words, a move from structure to anti-structure.

There is an essential feature, however, associated with the state of detainees in Australian immigration detention centres that resists the traditional interpretation of liminality and pertains more to Turner's work on the difficulties that arise when there is no closure of the liminal phase. The feature I am referring to is the concept of an indeterminate length of 'time in-between', i.e. prolonged liminality. Turner stresses the need for closure of the liminal phase and points to the cultural revolution of 1960s Western Europe and North America as examples where a collective transitional movement (*communitas*) did not find fulfilment in structure but languished in the tension of anticipation.²⁰ He explains that what eventuated was a frustrated longing for any kind of structure. In this example, Turner explains, advocates for institutional change did not, or could not, finalise the transitional process, which hindered the creative and progressive outcomes characteristic of transformative shifts through liminality. In relation to Bosnian refugees in Slovenia, Vrecer explains, 'The temporary status of the refugees' condition is very similar to the

liminality phase. The refugees are not sure when their temporary status will end, and whether integration into the host society or repatriation will follow at all. Although in some tribes with such rites de passage the reincorporation phase into stability follows, the question remains if repatriation will offer any firm prospects to achieve the stable condition'²¹

When the return to structure is prolonged the individual or community in the liminal stage runs the risk of suffering trauma experienced as a result of a continued and confused desire for closure.²² For Turner, liminality necessarily requires closure but when a short-term burst of creativity and attraction of insight is drawn out the liminal agent/s are drained of energy and constructive potential. The destructive and regressive feeling invoked by prolonged liminality is exacerbated by a number of notorious features of Australian asylum processing. First, almost all detainees and ex-detainees attest to grave inconsistencies in their interactions with immigration department officials. For instance, their relationship with immigration department representatives always depends on things such as the personality and mood of the staff member (case managers and case officers), the moment in time during which the communication takes place (stages in policy making and implementation), the socio-political climate at the time (political debates, voter preference and public opinion) and the results of other asylum seekers under review at the same time (number of rejections, acceptance and the ratio of nationalities they correspond to). Also, some of the most painstaking and traumatising features of asylum seeker processing in Australia are facts such as:

19 Turner (1969) p.95.

20 William M. Johnston, 'Liminality – Need for Closure', *Encyclopedia of Community: from the village to the virtual world*, Volume 3, eds K. Christensen and D. Levinson (California: Harcourt, 2003) p. 861.

21 Natalija Vrecer, 'Human Costs of Temporary Refugee Protection: The Case of Slovenia' in *A Captured Moment in Time: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences*, Vol. 10 eds Adrienne Rubeli and Nina Vucenic (Vienna: 2000), p. 14.

22 Johnston, 'Liminality', p. 861. The United States after 9/11 exemplifies an over-extended liminal state left longing for closure.

1. waiting for long and unspecified periods of time for information about acceptance or rejection of claims
2. waiting for an unspecified period of time for visas and, ultimately, release from detention and
3. response to requests for documents and information that will clarify the process and assist in the development of cases.

The uncertain, extended and amplified moment of limbo causes additional psychological stress. Also, it is often made worse by problems of misinformation, bad translation services, inappropriate timing and insufficient notice of follow-up meetings. The factors described here are mentally and physically destructive aspects of prolonged liminality in Australian immigration detention centres. They jeopardise the cases of asylum seekers because they destabilise detainees' state of mental health and ability to represent themselves. In other words, detainees in a situation of extended limbo are subject to unclear regulations and a non-transparent system that is being constantly modified. As a result, they are alienated from both their past lives and the future lives they had planned to lead. Therefore, any form of expression in immigration detention centres needs to be analysed in the context of the above conditions – a situation of prolonged liminality.

The 2011 riots that took place at the Christmas Island and Villawood immigration detention centres are direct consequences of prolonged liminality – a reaction to excessive conditions of anti-structure and an invocation of unbearable feelings of anxiety. The detention period is forced on vulnerable people by a power structure, the policies of which have been scrutinised in specialised research in various disciplines and by human rights organisations. The situation of the rioting detainees reflects many essential elements of the destructive outcome of an extended transitional period with an indeterminate moment of closure. Since those languishing in detention do not have knowledge of the specific times and stages of their process, nor clear standards with which to judge their treatment by the Immigration

Department and Serco, their interpretation of fundamental Australian values are distorted. Released detainees may find that professed Australian values such as rationality, patience, equality, fairness and respect for law and human rights are irreconcilable with the way they were treated while incarcerated and, sometimes, during settlement into Australian society.

Conclusions

One of aims of this study was to raise new questions about the problems associated with descriptions of 'Australian values' and, consequently, 'non-Australian values'. Attempts to answer these questions involve understanding inappropriate behaviour in the context of what is acceptable by the Australian general public. My selection and description of riots from Australian history prior to the Christmas Island and Villawood riots was presented to challenge presuppositions of the evaluative paradigm used to judge the behaviour of asylum seekers involved in the protests and disturbances. By conducting a comparative analysis of different significant riots one can begin to reposition the events in immigration detention centres according to a non-essentialist understanding of 'correct' and 'normal' action in Australian culture. In fact, in light of the examples I detailed in this paper, the uprisings involving detainees represent a fundamentally human outburst if one considers the extremely hopeless and humiliating situation the rioters were struggling with.

In comparing the recent riots in immigration detention centres with the other examples of rioting 'Down Under' it was indispensable that I recognise and elaborate on the distinguishing feature of an over-extended form of liminality. The similarities with other forms of rioting, and the contexts which caused and conditioned them, are necessary. However, the nature and character of the Christmas Island and Villawood riots and their driving influences are distinct because of the unusual and dangerous aspect of prolonged liminality.



Massoumeh Ghadiri, Self Portrait, pencil on paper, 29x41cm