

Terror Raids in the age of Team Australia

Anarchist Affinity

November 13, 2014

Before dawn on Thursday the 19th of September, more than 800 agents of the Australian state descended on more than twenty properties in Sydney's west. This unprecedented show of force yielded a mere fifteen arrests, only one of whom has been charged. It's not the outcome of the raids but rather their glossy Hollywood production values that we should look to when attempting to understand their function.

While the machinations of 'Operation Sovereign Borders' lie shrouded beneath layers of official secrecy, accounts of the terror raids were painstakingly detailed. Bellicose headlines proclaimed our salvation from the imminent jihadist threat, while the moment by moment specifics were spelled out below in lurid techno-thriller prose. High definition video – shot by the Australian Federal Police and the NSW Police's own media units – was made available to media outlets almost instantly, painting a flattering and heroic portrait of the dashing plod in action.

That the raids served to soften up some political terrain for the Iraq War mark 3 is an obvious, but incomplete, analysis. This argument assumes that the political class care what the people who live on this continent think about their military ventures. It's true that the prospect of war serves a range of domestic political functions – the appearance of "Tony Abbott: War Prime Minister" in the wake of a deeply unpopular federal budget is not a coincidence. But after 13 years in Afghanistan, it's increasingly unclear what the phrase 'Australia at war!' even means. The reality is that Australia doesn't go to war out of necessity, in service of high-minded democratic ideals or even to capture the Arab world's oil wealth for ourselves. And it's about more than an excuse for patriotic sabre rattling. These commitments have a consistent logic. They function as payment of tribute to our US patrons, whose economic and military hegemony defends the fundamental interests of Australia's violent colonial project.

As insipid as the collective memory of Australia's complicity in past imperialist exercises might be, it is no longer 1914, and people don't flock behind such obvious declarations any more. Thus, the state must look elsewhere for excuses, and the search begins to identify and delineate an 'other'. A collective subject capable of bearing responsibility for any and all ills within our society, or the world more generally. Whilst gaining some political cover to help smooth the way for Australia to enter the war in Iraq/Syria may be one part of the Abbott government's strategy here, it is more relevant to note some of the other things the Abbott government stands to gain politically (and materially) by saturating the national conversation with endless reminders of the existential threat of the Islamic Isis 'death cult'.

In settler states like Australia (or the US, Israel or Canada), the most existential of fears is the loss of the dominance of the colonial class and its identity. Australian history overflows with examples of the various 'foreign' perils that nationalists feared would take root and collaborate to destroy the society from within. In the modern west, particularly Anglophone countries, the political label 'terrorist' fulfils this function perfectly, and perpetually, because it can be redefined to suit basically any political ends which might emerge. It can, for instance, be used to reinforce the moral authority of the state's monopoly on the use of violence and force. All acts of active resistance to occupation or colonisation are deemed to be terrorism. Any form of struggle by any oppressed population can be wholly delegitimised due to its (perceived) association with terrorism. Anyone reluctant to support highly repressive, draconian measures designed to 'prevent' terrorism is guilty of being sympathetic to terrorism.

Whether the threat was credible or not, and it is now quite obvious that the existence of such a plot was hardly 'imminent' (in fact, little more than posturing by a small group of poorly organised extremists who authorities had been monitoring closely for a number of months), the crude propaganda value of such a stunt for the political class is enormous. But this isn't the only benefit. Such performances are also crucial in developing the legitimacy of an all-seeing surveillance apparatus and militarised police force.

Since the crisis of 2008, economic growth has stagnated or collapsed as capital struggles to extract profit in the context of a prolonged global downturn. This crisis produced both an opportunity and an imperative for renewed attacks on the working class, in the form of a series of measures that are generally termed economic austerity. Whilst capital and state have always shared a common interest in the protection of private property, a program of austerity that worsens the material conditions of large segments of the population requires much more robust methods of repression. Instability, whether along geopolitical fault lines or domestic class lines, might on occasion represent a threat to state and capital. But what it more often represents is a massive opportunity. Insecurity, even the perception of it, can be harnessed by the state, commodified by private industry and exploited for profit.

But this process requires legitimisation – a set of narratives to help sell the imperative of social control. In the Australian context, the threat posed to us by a racially or culturally 'inferior' other has been wielded in service of this end. Since the European invasion, constructed identity statements (first British, then Australian, always white) have been used to bludgeon people into distinct categories of belonging or rejection. These identities serve to create and reinforce binaries between 'us' and 'them', on the basis of highly arbitrary notions of what constitutes 'Australian-ness'. Such narratives imply the need for unity between workers and their masters, whatever their disagreements, under the banner of their common 'Australian' (European) identity. We can trace the lineage of the current 'Team Australia' narrative through the logic of Terra Nullius, the White Australia policy and the institution of mandatory detention. Though these identity statements have their foundations in the chauvinism of the British Empire, they have far greater utility for the ruling class than simply the expression of imperial prejudices. The ideology of white supremacy is used to justify the genocide of Aboriginal people, the enclosure of their lands and their continuing dispossession. It erases the role of slave labour in the 'development' of the Australian nation and its economy. It divides workers by immigration status, ethnicity, language and cultural background, determining an individual's worthiness and virtue on this basis.

The 'plot' that sparked the raids (to kidnap and behead an Australian citizen in an 'ISIS style' terror attack) invokes the high-profile murder of British soldier Lee Rigby, who was murdered by Islamists on a London street in May 2013. It's worth comparing the two incidents because, though the Australian plot was over before it had even begun, the response from the Australian press has in many ways exceeded the level of hysteria sparked in Britain by an actual murder. As Rigby's killers understood well (and, one suspects, Abbott and co.'s spin doctors do too), even the thought of such an act has the capacity provoke a storm of fear, disgust and outrage that carries the message – retribution against crusading western foreign policy – well beyond that street in Woolwich. That the press did this most important job for Rigby's killers is a bitter irony, and it had immediate, dramatic consequences.

In Britain, as in Australia, where ethno-religious tensions have been threatening to boil over for years, it is just not credible to suggest that the immediate and vicious anti-Muslim backlash that ensued was anything other than deliberate. In fact it was utterly predictable. It proved a godsend for declining far-right 'street movements' like the English Defence League, for example, who flooded into Woolwich in the hours after the attack attempting to whip up a pogrom under the guise of 'securing the area'. In the days and weeks that followed, attendance at EDL marches spiked frighteningly, and all across the UK communities of colour bore the brunt of a vicious, protracted campaign of racist violence. Shops, flats and cars thought to belong to Muslims were covered in racist graffiti or had their windows smashed. Mosques were threatened, invaded and desecrated with pig entrails. On at least two occasions, they were firebombed. Muslims, particularly women, were attacked on the streets and one elderly man was stabbed to death on his way home from worship.

Such a spree of retaliatory violence, though given energy by the far right, is ultimately the product of a media narrative that emphasises the collective guilt of the entire Islamic community. As in the wake of every terrorist scare, British and Australian Muslims have been routinely summoned before the court of public opinion and, down to the individual, instructed that they must publicly and at every possible opportunity apologise on behalf of the entire Islamic community. These communities must disavow terrorism (or Sharia, halal and a host of other poorly informed canards about Islam) or be labelled guilty of terrorist sympathies themselves.

The imposition of the burden of collective guilt is a product of the highly radicalised association of the term 'terrorist' with 'Muslim person' or 'person of colour' that is so ubiquitous in western societies. The possession of an Islamic identity, or even an identity that can be 'read' as Muslim, is viewed in a binary against dominant cultural norms of our society, and rendered unworthy in the face of our superior values. This is, of course, atrocious nonsense. But it has dramatic, long lasting effects.

The lives of young men of colour, already subject to a host of radicalised and structural oppressions in white supremacist societies like Australia, are further devalued. What this means, in blunt concrete terms, is that 'Australians' are less surprised and less outraged when the cops shoot them. Portrayals of a race, faith or other defining characteristics as associated with terrorism can be used to excuse the harassment, warrantless detention, brutalisation, torture or experience of racially motivated violence of anyone who also happens to possess some of these characteristics. The Islamic State's sophisticated propaganda and public relations campaign relies in no small part on exploiting the profound fear and alienation felt by people of colour, but particularly by young Muslim men, in places like Australia. The threats and acts of violence

against the Islamic community, which have skyrocketed in the wake of the raids, are exactly what their strategy requires.

It is important to highlight that the acts of violence inflicted on the Muslim community are committed, often quite specifically, in pursuit of some notion of service to the Australian state (think the cries of ‘Aussie Aussie Aussie’ and the rhetoric about protecting Australia during the Cronulla riots). Unlike repercussions for the Muslim community, when white Australians throw scalding coffee in the face of a Muslim woman on her way to work, or attack the home of a Muslim family with a shotgun, it is apparently an ‘isolated incident’. When white Australians attack mosques and Islamic community centres with racist graffiti, desecrate them with pig heads on spikes and phone in bomb threats against them, it may even be condemned by some members of the political class as a despicable act. But the guilt is never distributed collectively. When people of colour are racially abused and assaulted on public transport, or when scarves are pulled from women’s heads on the streets, it is seldom even the individual – and never Anglo-Australia – that is in any way held to account.

Other popular narratives, even the ones wrapped in appeals to liberalism and humanitarianism, also follow this logic. For example, the lives of Islamic women (who experience overwhelmingly the worst of the harassment and abuse) are conscripted and exploited in a narrative of victimhood which strips them completely of their own agency. Though the existence of gendered oppression in Islamic communities is beyond contention, it is both disingenuous and despicable to suggest that this is in any way a situation unique to Islamic communities.

So with a sense of outrage stirred, the existence of gender oppression and inequality in wider Australian society is conveniently cleansed from the public mind and Muslim society is placed under the microscope. Unlike women from white societies, we are told, Muslim women are categorically oppressed, and they require the benevolent intervention of our superior democratic values to ‘save’ them. (No, don’t ask them what they actually think. That’s not how this works.)

The irony of such statements emanating from the cartoonish, born misogynists of the parliamentary Liberal Party is simply staggering. But these narratives often find deep purchase amongst liberal minded Australians, who find obvious prejudice distasteful, but nevertheless want to ride on the Team Australia cultural superiority bandwagon. Such narratives worked with the Northern Territory intervention, with the Stolen Generations, and with ‘children overboard.’ And these narratives will keep working until we dismantle them.

The question of how anarchists, antifascists and others on the left should respond in such a toxic climate is vexed, and I don’t pretend to have any grand answers. But there are a few things that warrant a mention.

It should be obvious, first of all, that the more romantic tactics we associate with European antifascism are of very limited value in this situation. Of course, if a nationalist organisation should be so emboldened as to attempt to mobilise or organise publicly by exploiting this situation, it should be vehemently opposed. But I think such an outcome is somewhat unlikely. For all its attempts to channel mainstream Islamophobia into a broader nationalist street movement, the Australian Defence League is still riding on the coattails of the state (the ADL claims to work ‘closely with ASIO’, for instance). This is not a situation where focusing our all our attentions on shutting down the same old bunch of boneheads is useful. We should heed the political lesson of militant antifascist movements throughout history and understand that if we can’t present a credible, alternative analysis of how and why these things are happening, we’ve already lost.

Because the disgusting acts of racial vilification, harassment and violence suffered by Australian Muslims and other people of colour in the days since the raids are not motivated by any specific organisation or political tendency (beyond the imperatives of the white colonial state), organising to prevent them is an extremely difficult task.

This violence, after all, is retributive and overwhelmingly opportunistic. It can't be countered on the streets the same way as the threats posed by nationalist groups are. But it is not leaderless, disparate or incoherent in its inspiration. This violence was cultivated by the Australian state, and therefore our response must begin with and be defined by our opposition to the activities of the Australian state and the role it plays in oppressing communities of colour from Bankstown to Baghdad.

We should not presume when approaching this task that these communities need to be told how to organise or defend themselves, and we should certainly resist any and all attempts at party building in such a situation. This is not a moment for leftists to demonstrate the worthiness of their particular ideology to marginalised communities. Indeed, the inability of the left organisations to restrain themselves from doing this time and time again is a primary reason why the left is viewed with suspicion in many of these communities. It is time for us to work in solidarity with besieged communities, acting however we can to support them, rather than acting insultingly on their 'behalf'. If we are unwilling to listen to what communities of colour say about how to best resist the oppression they experience every day, we should just give up now.

Equally, whilst we can and should blame racist politicians and pundits for peddling their despicable bullshit, we cannot ignore the fact that such opinions are much closer to being the norm in contemporary Australia than notions of anti-racism or class solidarity. This reflects badly on generations of Australian leftists who have been unable (or unwilling) to advance a genuinely popular form of anti-racist politics, a kind that stresses class solidarity without becoming beholden to the type of class reductionism that all but declares that dismantling racism can wait until after the revolution.

We have to take seriously the fact that racism in Australia is not simply a distraction, thrown to the workers to inoculate bosses against the class struggle. It is a tremendously pervasive ideology, including amongst the working class, and opposing it effectively begins with acknowledging just how big the task before us is.

This piece was written for a few reasons, but mostly to contribute in some small way towards developing some ideas about the kind of antifascism necessary in Australia right now. And so, to end, I hope to help begin that conversation.

An effective Australian antifascism must be able to explain declining living standards, casualisation and unemployment. It must identify not only capital, but also the state, as the beneficiaries of racial division amongst the working class. It must describe how these institutions help to create and benefit from these divisions. But it cannot simply reduce the situation to this narrow analysis. Our antifascism must be intersectional because solidarity doesn't work without collectivising all struggles for liberation.

An Australian antifascism must identify the settler-colonial nature of our society, because the 'lucky country' is nothing but the proceeds of a crime more than 200 years in the act.

Violence is absolutely inherent in white Australia, no matter what top-down constructions of multiculturalism claim. The flag cannot be rehabilitated, nor can patriotism. Appeals to a more benevolent past only help to obscure the fact that it never existed.

We must identify expressions and experiences of racism in Australia as both structural and deeply personal. It has never been isolated. It is something which occurs every day, and thus, our antifascism must stress the need for everyday interventions, all the way from rhetorical to physical, against the perpetuation of white supremacy.

It is largely due to the incompetence of the Australian far right, and not our own efforts, that we don't have a much bigger problem on our hands. This is serious. And we need to be too.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Anarchist Affinity
Terror Raids in the age of Team Australia
November 13, 2014

Retrieved on March 11, 2021 from web.archive.org
Published in *The Platform* Issue 3 – Spring 2014.

theanarchistlibrary.org