

Fear, Security and the Politics of Representing Asylum Seekers

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¹ The stand-off involving the asylum-seekers on board the Tampa, off the coast of Australia in August-September 2001, represented a critical confluence of security, fear. The Australian government's response to the issue of stranded asylum-seekers, it is argued here, was a directly calculated political representation aimed at creating fear in the Australian populace: fear of a threat to Australian security. The fear generated by the Australian government, in which the national media was a willing accomplice, allowed for a perception among Australians that the government's actions, in refusing to allow the Tampa to offload its passengers, were consistent with the provision of national security. The government was preserving the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the state in the face of this constructed "threat" to Australia's security.

² The provision of security is central to the state's reason for being. If the state is not capable of providing security, however that security is to be defined, the continued legitimacy and even existence of the state itself must necessarily be questioned, as Michael Dillon has argued. The power and importance of the security narrative can therefore not be underestimated. Further, Dillon argues, this security has generally been conceived as the security of the "self" against the "other". Attempts to be seen to be "doing the job" of security has throughout history involved the identification and vilification of this other, with the fear of the other consequently constituting or reifying the self and contributing to the legitimacy of governments. The nature of this relationship between identity, security and fear is central to the government's politics of representing the asylum seekers. The Howard government acknowledged, rightly, that making people afraid of the threat posed by waves of foreign asylum seekers and evoking the narrative of security would contribute to a solidification of the Australian self, and unite the people of Australia behind its political leaders, who were working to protect Australians from this "threat".

³ The fear created by the Australian government was constructed in a number of ways. First, the government argued that Australia was faced with a possible future wave of illegal immigrants, a situation that threatened the future security of the country. Seen in this light, the decision to prevent the Tampa from offloading asylum seekers was a means of achieving security by sending a message to would-be boat people that Australia was not a "soft touch". Second, the government evoked a range of images central to traditional discourses of security, concerned predominantly with the preservation of the nation-state from military attack. As Burke argues, the government variously talked of "territorial integrity", "sovereignty" and "national interests", concepts that, when spoken of together, would seem more suited to a situation of armed conflict rather than one involving the captain of a cargo boat looking to offload asylum seekers for processing in Australia. The consistency of this type of language with earlier depictions of the threat of Japanese invasion during World War II, for example, is not an historical coincidence. It is argued here that the use of such language helped create a context in which the idea of asylum seekers as threatening to Australian security, and therefore to be feared, had resonance with the domestic population. Finally, the government constructed fear through its attempts to depict the asylum-seekers as an "other", foreign to Australian identity. This was achieved in part through questioning the legitimacy of their claims to asylum over others awaiting processing, and also through the very act of depicting them as threats to security. Their religious and ethnic otherness was not played on specifically by the government, although claims that asylum seekers threw children into the ocean, which were to later be proved erroneous, portrayed asylum-seekers as less than human. The combination of these acts constructed a fear in the Australian populace, a fear of the threat to Australian self from a foreign other, thus pointing to the relationship between fear, security and identity.

⁴ In an excellent recent text on Australian security, Anthony Burke convincingly argues that the government's response to, or indeed creation of, the Tampa crisis can be viewed as the continuation of an enduring narrative of security and fear that has been the cornerstone of Australian identity and subjectivity since 1788. This narrative, he argues, has been constitutive and reflective of Australia's sense of self, and has allowed for politics that has denied the rights of the other throughout Australia's history. This perspective is not limited to the Australian subject. In a seminal text on US security, David Campbell argues that the provision of security in the United States has similarly been linked to identity politics in which the fear of a vilified other was central to the constitution of the self and the legitimacy of governments. The relationship between fear, identity politics and security is particularly evident, Campbell argues, in the McCarthy era attacks on "communist dissidents" during the early years of the Cold War. The point to be made from these examples is that fear is not just implicated in the construction of security and indeed the self: it is integral to that project.

⁵ Facile as the comparison may be, the approach of the Australian government to this issue is reminiscent of the plot of the 1995 movie, Canadian Bacon. In the film, a US President suffering from low popularity ratings invents a confrontation with Canada in order to unite the American people behind him and enhance his chances of winning a second term in office. In inventing this threat, his administration portrayed Canadians residing in the United States as possible spies for the Canadian administration and also expressed suspicion of the hegemonic aspirations of the Canadian government in general. The fear created through such a depiction, it was hoped, would allow the

President enough popularity to be re-elected. Perhaps the central difference between this example and the Howard government's approach to the asylum seeker "threat" is that the fictional US President in question was not successful in his bid for re-election.

6 Joseph Camilleri has persuasively argued that security is a psychological rather than material state. In other words, security is about feeling rather than being secure. As such, governments must seek to create conditions in which this feeling of security is engendered in order to retain legitimacy. Enter the narrative of fear. Fear creates a basis for perceptions that the government is providing security, because once a population becomes concerned at threats posed by different actors, that population becomes almost necessarily supportive of actors viewed as capable of addressing that threat. Seen in this light, the creation of threat, regardless of the material significance of the threat itself, is a useful tool for governments to maintain legitimacy.

7 Importantly, in the case of the asylum-seekers, these individuals themselves, and the nature of their plight, had limited relevance to the political project of the Australian government. This is aside from the important caveat that they were not of Anglo-Saxon appearance, and therefore "different" to dominant depictions of the Australian self, a difference reinforced by claims of their willingness to endanger the lives of their own children. The fact that many asylum seekers were escaping the oppression of a regime Howard himself had described as evil, and whose invasion he was simultaneously supporting, seems to have slipped through the cracks of popular consciousness. This paradox did not seem to bother the Australian government, whose political representation of asylum seekers did not require any attention to where they had come from or why they had been willing to risk their lives in seeking refuge. The government merely had to point to a future "wave of boat-people": queue-jumping "illegals" who had targeted Australia as an international "soft touch". The fear created by such an image was enough to suppress any lingering form of empathy or, for that matter, rationality. Even a rationalist would struggle to reconcile the government's commitment to international human rights norms, its support for the war against terrorism and depiction of the evil Taliban regime of Afghanistan, and its commitment to preventing Afghani asylum-seekers from having claims processed in Australia. The government was riding on a wave of fear, a fear that would play a significant role in the re-election of the Howard government and the continued popular support for mandatory detention of asylum-seekers and the government's "Pacific Solution".

8 Can we imagine a situation in which security can mean something other than the security of the self (in this case the Australian nation-state) at the expense of the other (asylum seekers)? Can we imagine a situation in which security is associated with emancipation of individuals, as Critical Security theorists advocate, rather than the (military) protection of the sovereignty of the state? Burke is sceptical, largely because the narrative of security as fear has permeated Australian politics, and the Australian subject, since the initial dispossession of indigenous people in the eighteenth century. In an international climate where fear still prevails, particularly in the wording of President Bush's recent State of the Union address in which he warned Americans of the "Axis of Evil", it is difficult to see how, or where, normatively progressive security politics would be located. When government or regime legitimacy can be assisted through recourse to an identity politics predicated on fear, what incentive could we imagine for an acknowledgment of the claims of "others"? The answer to this question lies partly in this paper itself, and in the other contributions in this journal to the question of fear and social relations. The power of fear, it is argued here, is necessarily undermined by an analysis of the construction of fear itself. This form of critique, following Foucault, is critical to breaking down a knowledge-power nexus that, in the case of security and the asylum seekers renders us secure through the suffering of others. While we may not expect critical analysis to reconstitute politics and identity in the short-term, we can reasonably expect such analyses to undermine the resonance of such narratives of fear.

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