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Disruption on a Global Scale: Refugees, Terrorists and Other Border-Crossers

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In the aftermath of the 'triumphant' war in Iraq, we are in danger of averting our eyes from the long-term problems associated with disruption on a global scale, including the inevitable effects on people's lives of military intervention. It is indicative that most Australians have all-too-quickly thrown a comforting rug over the issue that senior Australian government figures were caught lying about the motives of refugees fleeing such global disruption—supposedly it was only a now-retired politician who misrepresented the children as being thrown overboard as a stunt.

When it comes to refugees and terrorists, government leaders have been telling lies of a very particular kind. The first confronting dimension of the Australian government's misrepresentations is not just what John Howard, Peter Reith or Philip Ruddock said about the children overboard, or what John Howard and Alexander Downer knew about the evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, but that they no longer know what it means to lie. They dissemble the truth into such complex legal fictions that making judgements about political integrity of our politicians now depends upon enlisting QCs and historians to unravel the intricacies of who knew what, when. Maybe in thirty years, as with lots of other political episodes, we will get closer to the truth.

The even more confronting issue is that many Australians want to believe the misrepresentations. Booker Prize winning author Peter Carey beautifully expressed this sentiment of desire in his Australian novel *Illywacker* (1985, p.186): 'I took the lies and held them gratefully. I wrapped them around me and felt the soft comfort a child feels inside a woollen rug. And this, of course is what anyone means when they say a lie is creditable; they do not mean that it is a perfect piece of engineering, but that it is comfortable.'

In the context of this disgraceful period in Australian contemporary history, deep research into the structures of globalisation and its discontents is becoming more and more pressing. Constantly exposing the lies is one important task, but it is not enough. In fact, keeping the analysis at the level of exposing misrepresentations has reached the stage of becoming ineffective, or worse,

getting lost in the reverie of journalistic exposure.

Moreover, we face the political complexity that mainstream Australia can see little alternative to the policies that followed the Tampa crisis—refugees being sent off to Pacific island prisons, or, for those who make it to Australian shores, being held in privatised concentration camps surrounded by razor wire and spinifex grass. The best it seems that we, its critics, can imagine as alternatives are either more humanised versions of the detention camps (hardly a great leap forward) or complete dismantling of 'the nation as an immense prison ... as a space of non-space where the slow suicide of all is called life' (Anthony Burke, 2002, p.25). It is understandable that some left commentators now deploy the metaphor of the nation as great prisonhouse, but their postmodern utopia/dystopia of 'no borders' is unfortunately more likely to generate a politics of reactionary fear than to set us free.

We already face the involutions of an insecure nation that maintains a commitment to an ill-conceived war on terrorism—that is, despite the exposure of political dissembling. It does not matter to them that in Afghanistan the coalition killed more civilians than were murdered in the strike upon New York and Washington. It does not sink in that in Iraq the reconstruction will take years, or that the overall prospects for peace are made bleaker as a rejuvenated presidential dullard promotes a meta-war to cover an extending 'axis of evil'. Put in more general terms, we face a process of militarised and market-oriented hyper-globalisation, a process that has brought both miracles and wonders, and extraordinary pain. It leads most people to feel that they have no choice but to manage their own interests in the chaotic flow and look to the relative certainty of clear-headed leaders.

Contemporary globalisation has in important respects taken a new and distressing turn. It is a turn that requires new modes of analysis rather than resorting to new versions of 'old verities', including the view that once the truth is exposed justice will prevail. Many issues need to be explored. Across the course of the twentieth century and into the present there has been a paradoxical reassertion of nationalism at a time of galloping globalism.

There is a strange tension between the increasingly free flow of abstract capital and culture, while the movement of people is administered more tightly than at any time in human history. And in relation to Australia there has been the compounded effect that as an insecure nation we have hardened our boundaries with a passion that verges on a new xenophobia, while those same politicians who administer that policy feel comfortable to use the doctored language of 'generosity' and 'lending a helping hand' for the 'deserving'.

In the face of these complexities, conventional media commentary and political rhetoric alike have tended to become human-interest clichéd, soullessly intense and sound-bite interjected. When old iniquities such as the global slave trade appear in new guises such as sex tourism they are either ignored or fitfully sensationalised. When, in the context of intensified military and economic upheaval, people move as refugees, they are greeted either with temporary generosity (witness the response to the Kosovars) or with a closure of national boundaries that despite claims to the contrary has no systematic precedent in human history. And when relatively new issues such as global terrorism emerge, they are handled with either stunned incomprehension or a reactionary and self-confirming state violence that exacerbates escalating hostilities.

In response to this state of affairs, I want to posit three arguments. First, we are in part hindered in the task of interrogating the ideological strength of globalisation because the dominant and superficially positive images of globalism are so easy to criticise. Secondly, notwithstanding the current emphasis of the critics of globalisation on exposing the ideologies of neo-liberalism, the ideological assumptions that underpin globalization go much deeper into the culture of the present. Thirdly, there is a tragic dark side to globalisation that needs to be confronted systematically rather than sensationally. This is the world of slaves, refugees and civilians caught in the cross-fire of power struggles and wars on terrorism. Exposing these problems of global disruption by setting out to shock people into action has become almost entirely counter-productive.

The ideological grounding of globalisation

While there is much that is actually and potentially positive about globalisation—for example, the breaking down of insular parochialism—most of the images of globalism are either crass or bound up with a kind of postnational exceptionalism. This exceptionalism goes under the rubric of 'We are the best at globalising ourselves in the national interest.' For example, we are told that Australia was there, right at the 'beginning' of the era of globalisation (I say that ironically). On 21 July 1969 when the lunar module touched down on the moon we 'know' that Australia received and transmitted the

first live pictures of the landing. Newspaper reports at the time told us so, and it has since been confirmed in national mythology by the film *The Dish*. Australia was in fact a fraction of a second ahead of the rest of the world because of an accident of geography and timing. When Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon it was lunch-time on the eastern seaboard of Australia (12.56 p.m. Australian EST) and teachers had set up black-and-white televisions in classrooms and school halls. I was in grade six and watched the miracle with an estimated 500 million people around the world. And we were proud—proud of our nation though we didn't quite know what it had done; naively proud of what was proclaimed as a global achievement.

While there were some criticisms at the time that over \$100 billion (in today's money) was spent on a folly while children in the Third World starved, the moment has nevertheless lived on as 'ushering in' the era of high-tech wonders: a hyper-market era of goods from Teflon to computer miniaturisation. This has led Left commentators to critically focus on deconstructing the ideologies that directly defend the globalizing capitalist market. In one sense this critique is crucial. However, in its dominance as the unremitting focus of critique it has inadvertently contributed to reducing globalism to one of its expressions—neoliberal globalism—without understanding the fear and fascination that globalising capitalism holds. To be sure neo-liberalism is one of the dominant philosophies of our time; however, part of its power is, strangely, that it is at one level so contested. Its glaring prominence blinds us to the breadth and depth of a matrix of associated ideologies that are left relatively uninterrogated. In the process, some of the assumptions associated with globalism-in-general slip away unnoticed.

The usual approach is to concentrate on ideologies of progress and economic development, of instrumental management and economic rationalism, but this misses out on lots of others. Take for example the following ideologies. They are ideologies that are usually uncontested or taken for granted. They are sensibilities that affect different people in uneven ways, but they nevertheless constantly impinge upon the various life-worlds of modernized, globalized souls:

1. *interconnectivity*, the cultural imperative to be always available in a loop of potential communicative connection, preferably electronic. This message is being 'benignly' and constantly reinforced by the globalizing mobile-phone market. We feel it in our bodies to the extent that most of us are uncomfortable with its opposite—unchosen isolation. Even when we are in the face-to-face presence of others, we feel the need 'to know', to be in mediated connection with what is happening in the world.

2. *mobility*, the imperative to develop a capacity to move across borders. Here the unease comes from

an aversion to being relegated to a projected mire of parochialism. It is easy to see how these ideologies of mobility and interconnectivity intersect with globalism. Electronic interconnectivity, both as practice and idea, helps to sustain our sense of viable open mobility largely free of the attendant perceived risks of dealing with strangers face-to-face. As the world globalises it simultaneously becomes full of strangers to fear and full of people with whom communication is possible. This relates to a further ideology of security.

3. *security*, the imperative to manage one's place in the mobile risk society. This includes an imperative to manage rogue elements or processes that assail that sense of relative comfort. It is indicative that even during the period that opposition to the war on Iraq intensified, it would have taken a brave person in the West to say that Osama bin Laden was philosophically onto something of value. The definition of him as a rogue element, whether evil or merely criminal, has been almost totalising.

4. *justice and democracy*, the imperative to couch any claims to action in the world in terms of human rights discourse. For example, the importance of deposing the Taliban was in part legitimised by the Bush administration in terms of Taliban oppression of Afghani women. In the aftermath of the war in Afghanistan the continuing oppression of women, documented by such groups as Human Rights Watch Report, is either glossed over or passed into irrelevancy by assertions of the importance of 'doing something in the first place'. In other words, it was through the rhetoric of human rights that we were drawn into the importance of a doctrine of war-making now known in the international relations literature as 'humanitarian intervention'. The invasion of Iraq, for example, was conducted in the name of freedom.

5. *freedom, autonomy and transcendence*, the imperative to overcome limits and oppressions. The notion of freedom includes a bevy of associated words that flock together—words such as 'autonomy', 'liberty', 'independence', 'emancipation', 'choice', and 'openness'. While the meaning of 'freedom to choose' has been rewritten by the marketeers with cars named 'Freedom' and 'Freelander', with Ford's advertising in 2003 running under the slogan 'no boundaries', and with AOL Broadband asking us to 'Get used to freedom', the subjectivity of freedom transcends market projections. Even neoliberal notions of freedom are much broader than usually portrayed and related to such ideologies as 'making the world free for democracy'. Ronald Reagan expressed it beautifully as a divine assignment to spread the 'sacred fire of human liberty'. It thus involves an apparent paradox as this particular concept of 'freedom' in conjunction with the ideology of security entails developing the infrastructure to defend the free movement and operation of some, and to strictly curtail

the freedom of others.

Who in our modern/postmodern world but a few recalcitrants or neo-traditionalists would argue that any one of these imperatives could be intrinsically bad? This, I argue, is precisely their power as ideologies. At one level, these ideologies are connected as cross-cutting and often contradictory precepts, shovelled up into a grab-bag of clichés that can be delivered out of context, out of contestation. At a deeper level, they form the cultural ground upon which we walk. While the many critics of corporate globalisation have been addressing the economic problems of globalism as they directly confront us, neoliberal and neoconservative commentators such as Francis Fukuyama (1999) have with minimal scrutiny been quietly redefining the ground beneath.

The dark side of globalisation

The tragic underside to globalism is no longer hidden by neo-liberal ideologues; it is re-represented as an aberration. In this world of dissembling and ideological (mis)representation, the problems of globalisation are readily admitted. Mainstream Australians and Middle Americans know, for example, that people are dying of starvation while the world produces enough food for all. The issue is that critical commentators fail to get past the neo-liberal claims that the problems of the world are a hangover from the past, a result of resurgences of primordial violence or passing side-effects of a generally improving situation.

While recognising continuities from the past, understanding the new forms of the global disruption has become an imperative. First, for example, the global slave trade has taken a new form, with a shift from old-style ownership to control by fear and indentured coercion. Kevin Bales' book, *Disposable People* (1999), documents a global resurgence that surpasses the whole period of the transatlantic slave trade: 27 million people in bondage, with some other writers giving estimates as high as 200 million. Most of these are bonded labourers in South Asia carrying cross-generational debt. Others include sex slaves, particularly in countries such as Thailand where an estimated 200,000 women and children are involved. I was once taken to a reclaimed island off Kobe, Japan, where slave lords controlled an entire high-rise housing development. Getting rid of nation-states—Anthony Burke's 'immense prisons'—will not solve these problems.

Secondly, the global refugee movement has taken a new form, and nation-states have hardened their boundaries in an unprecedented way. There are significant criticisms to be made both of border paranoia and of state security measures, but here again focussing on the border itself is not enough. Borders don't cause the upheaval. Of the estimated 30-40 million refugees in the world today, most do not have the wherewithal to

leave their immediate regions. The problem is that instead of working on a global front to respond to this crisis, governments have turned inward and citizens are pleased to have the burden taken from them.

It was the ALP that introduced mandatory detention for asylum seekers in 1992, and it is clear now that, despite claims to the contrary by the Australian government, Australia has not been generous in international terms. John Howard has publicly, and on a number of occasions such as the policy launch in November 2001, argued that we are second behind Canada in terms of generosity. It is simply a statistical lie. To be sure, in 2000 Australia was third behind Canada, but only when considered in terms of the number of refugees accepted by a very narrow group of countries: the ten countries that offer the UNHCR a quota. There are many countries in the world that do not place a quota on entry. Moreover, that placement of third (never second) was before the 13,700 acceptances in 2000 dropped to 7,500 places last year. Taken on a per-capita basis, again comparing those ten countries, Australia falls to fourth. However, if we expand the comparison to include the whole of the world on the basis of the total number of refugee intake Australia falls to thirty-second place behind countries including the United States, Liberia and Yemen. Well, you might reply, Australia has a small population. How can we be expected to keep up with the United States? The brutal fact is that on the basis of intake per capita we fall even further to thirty-ninth place. Countries such as Ethiopia, Yemen, Burundi, Nepal, Namibia, Armenia, the Sudan, Canada, Tanzania, and Switzerland do better than Australia, even on a per capita basis (Thuy Do, 2002).

Thirdly, the 'War on Terrorism' has opened the possibility of a globally continuous state-of-war where the enemy is both an abstract entity (terrorism) and a particularised 'evil' other (bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, with new figures of evil named as the situation unfolds). It is a condition of meta-war with many new characteristics. The enemy no longer carries the status of national sovereignty or national territory. The targets are defined on the run and the theatre of operation can be named without justifying evidence. Intense surveillance in the home nation-states has become a way of life, with fine calibrations of risk assessment and gross increases in insecurity becoming two sides of the same coin.

If we don't find positive ways of reconstructing (rather than simply dismantling) the current form of the nation-state we will be left telling ourselves soft lies about the state of the world. The processes of globalisation need to be rethought, and not just in terms of more 'freedom' (Left) or more 'security' (Right and Third Way). In the 1950s it was possible to voice dissembling words of reassurance about the good life—that is, until

the lies were retrospectively exposed. Now we face an added danger. The lies and their retrospective exposure threaten to make us cynically passive. In the meantime the world returns to the level of danger that we experienced in the era of Mutually Assured Destruction.

Endnote

1. This article is based upon an address given in 2002 as the inaugural lecture for the Innovation Chair in Globalism and Cultural Diversity at RMIT.

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PICKING OLIVES

There are barely two colours: green and grey.
The first, of dull drab olive from the hill;
and secondly a close knit sky that weighs
above the trees a massive crop of chill:

a long canvas the old man borrows from-
to pull beneath the trees. And she, whose shape
now questions the ground for answers takes on
a small grizzled piece of the same cloth to cape

her hair and shoulders. See with their sticks
and pails what strange creature they are become-
who mine the long ripe hedge and heavy pick
of hidden fruit. Winter winds its own numb

sheet about the scene - hemmed with wind and rain.
Two pale ghosts who harvest summer days again.

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