

Cross-cultural Collaboration: Opportunities and Challenges

Christina Ho

Abstract

In the era of the 'clash of civilisations', culture has taken centre stage in both global and local politics. For the neo-cons, a supposed cultural clash is at the heart of the 'War on Terror', being fought against terrorists both abroad and the 'home-grown' variety. Post-9/11 nationalisms are increasingly aggressive and suspicious of cultural minorities. In Australia and elsewhere, Muslims and Arabs have been particularly vilified as threats to social cohesion and national security. This led to a widespread backlash against multiculturalism under Howard, whose government replaced multiculturalism with the concept of integration in policies and public discourse. So far, the Rudd Government has done little to restore a public valuing of cultural diversity.

This section explores how social movements can respond, and in particular, the challenges facing activists working across cultural difference on some of the most important political work of our time, involving anti-war, anti-racist, feminist, and civil liberties activism. Analysis of social movements in these arenas is crucial because responding to neo-conservative cultural politics is not a simple or straightforward process. Each possible path comes with its own underlying politics. Yet there is surprisingly little research on the effectiveness and political implications of different activist approaches. As Bonnett (2000: 2) notes, there is a large body of research on racism, but anti-racism is mainly seen as simply a 'cause', 'fit only for platitudes of support or denouncement'.

In the era of the 'clash of civilisations', culture has taken centre stage in both global and local politics. Since September 11, 2001, inter-cultural relations have been powerfully recast, in much policy and popular debate, in terms of an underlying cultural – or 'civilisational' (Huntington 2002) conflict between the values of the 'West' and 'Islam'. For the neo-cons, this supposed clash is at the heart of the War on Terror, being fought against terrorists both abroad and the 'home-grown' variety. Post-9/11 nationalisms are increasingly aggressive and suspicious of cultural minorities. In Australia and elsewhere, Muslims and Arabs have been particularly vilified as threats to social cohesion and national security. This led to a widespread backlash against multiculturalism under John Howard, whose government (1996-2007) replaced multiculturalism with the concept of integration in policies and public discourse. So far, the government of Kevin Rudd has done little to restore a public valuing of cultural diversity.

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But first, some historical context: under the Howard Government, Australia went through a series of 'moral panics' about race, culture and ethnicity, focused squarely on Muslims and Arabs. From the Middle Eastern asylum seekers who were demonised as queue-jumpers and locked away in detention centres, to the 'ethnic gang rapists' who were allegedly terrorising 'Aussie women', just as Muslim women were 'oppressed' by their barbaric faith and community, Muslim and Arab communities in Australia were targeted as jeopardising the social fabric of the nation and harbouring backward and 'un-Australian' values. This anxiety arguably culminated in the Cronulla riots of 2005, which saw thousands of largely Anglo-Australians gathering to 'take back' the beach from the 'Lebs', in the process hunting down and violently attacking anyone of 'Middle Eastern appearance' (these 'moral panics' have been extensively documented, e.g. Poynting et al 2004; Dreher and Ho 2009; Noble forthcoming).

Of course racism is not new in Australia, a nation whose very foundation rested on the attempted genocide of the Indigenous people. And each new wave of immigrants to the country has experienced its own upsurge of hostility. However, since the introduction of multiculturalism in the 1970s, race-based hostilities have never enjoyed the level of official support as they did under the Howard Government.¹ Particularly after September 11, 2001, local enmities came to directly mirror global hostilities, flamed by political leaders viewing inter-cultural relations through the lens of a dangerous and simplistic 'clash of civilisations'.

The backlash against multiculturalism is particularly visible in two shifts in public policy and discourse under the Howard Government. The first is what Lentin (2008: 313) describes as the 'positive turn', in which the 'negativity' of anti-racism is replaced with a much less

¹ For example, see Fear 2007 and Manning 2004 on the Howard Government's 'dog-whistle politics', in which code words were deployed in political speeches to appeal to racist elements of the electorate despite the avoidance of explicitly racist language.

oppositional ‘celebration of diversity’. This is the politics of the supposedly post-racial age (Goldberg 2002). In Australia, this celebratory approach to cultural difference is epitomised in the evolution of official multicultural policy, which has seen all references to racism gradually eradicated from policy and public discourse, replaced by notions such as ‘living in harmony’ (DIAC 2008). Official programs have increasingly encouraged community projects that emphasise and celebrate ‘what we have in common’, rather than critical initiatives that seek to explore the continuation of inter-communal or institutionalised racism (Ho and Dreher 2006, Ho 2007).

The second shift, coexisting alongside the first, is a ‘securitisation’ of multicultural policy, which has seen a growing focus on the surveillance of minority communities, in particular, scouring Muslim communities for potential threats to national security, monitoring religious leaders, and ‘de-radicalising’ young Muslim men (Bergin et al 2007, Jakubowicz 2008). This policy direction has continued under the Rudd Government.

Clearly, constructions of culture, race and religion are at the heart of the security agenda that now justifies all manner of draconian policies. Ideas about inevitable cultural ‘clashes’ and the milder ‘cultural incompatibilities’ are viewed via the lens of national security and therefore come to justify crackdowns on minority communities that pave the way for restrictions on other potential ‘threats’ to security, even peace activists – as witnessed in the deportation of US peace activist Scott Parkin in 2005 (ABC 2005).

How have activists responded to this new era of Islamophobia and racism? On some fronts, progressive campaigns have had a great deal of success. Mobilisations against the detention of asylum seekers, for example, succeeded in closing some of the harshest detention centres and ended the incarceration of women and children. Public hostility towards asylum seekers has also largely eased since the early 2000s.² More broadly though, there has been little response to the attacks on multiculturalism.³ While official multiculturalism has always been an imperfect vehicle for minority rights and social justice, the erasure of the ‘M’ word from public policy has allowed much more conservative concepts such as ‘integration’ and ‘social

² For example, in 2009, Liberal Party parliamentarians were unable to create the same level of popular fear and hostility towards asylum seekers arriving by boat as existed in the early 2000s.

³ Perhaps with the exception of ‘professional multiculturalists’, government-funded peak bodies representing ethnic community organisations. However, these peak bodies have also lost much of their critical capacity, reflecting the decline of the sector as a whole.

cohesion' to define debates. In spite of its faults, the absence of any substantial attempts to politically defend multiculturalism has been striking.

What explains this weak response from the grassroots? Historically, progressive movements in Australia have tended to be Anglo-dominated, with a relatively weak record of working with people from other backgrounds. The traditional monoculturalism of Australian labour, feminist and other movements has been well documented (e.g. Ang 1995, Bulbeck 1998, Ho 2008, Kaplan 1996). Post-war migrants often had comparatively high levels of unionisation (Alcorso 1993), but unions were mostly unreceptive to their issues, particularly those of migrant women. Nor have migrant women been particularly welcome in the largely white, middle class feminist movement. And even when efforts have been made to diversify women's organisations, their definitions of women's liberation have not always appealed to those from other cultural backgrounds. This means that activists who now wish to work cross-culturally have few models to follow (although some environmentalist-Indigenous collaborations may provide examples).

Religion poses another barrier, with many secular activists lacking the inclination or experience in working with faith-based groups, and Muslims in particular. At a deeper level, most progressive ideologies, whether based on variants of Marxism, social democracy or libertarianism, have been defined in secular, and even anti-religious terms. Notwithstanding the strategic alliances with some Catholic and other Christian groups on issues such as peace and poverty, most progressive activists are suspicious of, if not hostile toward religion, and resistant to any expansion of religious discourse or identity in public politics. This is an awkward position from which to respond to the rise of Islamophobia.

Ideologically, the lack of activism also reflects the complex status of issues relating to culture and ethnicity in traditional progressive movements. On one level, the traditional leftist emphasis on class conflict marginalises race and culture. Racism is seen as an epiphenomenon of social divisions that are ultimately class-based. Minorities working on anti-racist politics have been viewed almost as victims of false consciousness, racialising and segregating themselves (Lentin 2008: 321), at the cost of a strong and coherent progressive political agenda. Along with gender and sexuality, issues around cultural diversity have

always sat uneasily within leftist agendas, traditionally seen as potentially undermining political solidarity, and distractions from the main game of class-based inequality.

On a more practical level, the preoccupation with political unity has created a tendency for leftists to attempt to incorporate anti-racist activity within broader political movements, including assuming leadership of anti-racist movements. This has then led to charges of the re-colonisation of marginalised communities by larger, and usually White-dominated political movements. In the UK, the Socialist Workers Party's leadership of the Anti-Nazi League attracted this sort of criticism (Dawson 2005).

Ultimately, the fear of being perceived as 'interfering' or 'taking over' anti-racist movements has produced a form of passivity or avoidance on the part of some progressive movements. Non-action is seen as the most appropriate response in order to respect minority communities' autonomy and integrity. Goodall (2005: 69-69) has documented a similar phenomenon in relation to working with Indigenous communities in Australia. But this avoidance can also lead to a resistance to acknowledging the legitimacy of racism as a 'mainstream' political issue. For example, in the midst of the 2007 federal election, Leah Ginnivan (2007) responded to an online opinion piece on the absence of multiculturalism from the debates, writing that bringing up multiculturalism was possibly divisive, and that 'every time race is brought up as an issue that needs to be debated, it seems to set back progressive causes'. Kevin Dunn et al (2009) characterise this as 'an emerging form of political correctness that proscribes the discussion of racism', with activists drawing attention to racism accused of 'playing the race card'.

The politics of avoidance contributes to the perception that anti-racism belongs exclusively to cultural minorities, with no legitimate role for activists from the mainstream culture. Partly as a result, many minority groups have turned to a politics of identity to pursue their cause, anchoring their political voice in their membership of a particular ethnic or cultural community (other reasons for this tendency are explored below). This form of anti-racism can easily become overly defensive, whereby ethnic communities targeted as the 'outgroup' at any one time respond by defending their communities from attack, in isolation from any broader political critique of the social structures of racism and inequality.

Additionally, an anti-racism built on a defensive community-based response, amidst silence from ‘mainstream’ progressives, is often profoundly anti-democratic, and can lead to the further marginalisation of the least powerful within minority communities. Migrant organisations in Australia have usually been dominated by unelected conservative men, some of whom came to virtually monopolise government funding and patronage over decades of official multiculturalism. Women, young people and those with progressive values have generally been excluded from positions of influence within such organisations (see Poynting et al 2004; Tabar et al 2003; Vasta 2004).

Saeed Khan, for example, has commented on the dominance of conservative religious leaders in the Australian Muslim community, stating, ‘Our problem is that the community’s leadership has been set up on the basis of religious institutions and Islamic councils... [however] from my experience, the majority of the people are not very religious at all’ (cited in Wainwright 2005). In this way, Muslim community leaders and organisations may be quite unrepresentative of the diversity of Australian Muslims, a situation mirrored in many other Australian ethnic communities.

In addition, again largely because of the history of government funding of the ‘ethnic sector’, the majority of migrant community organisations are ethno-specific, representing one ethnic group (and sometimes in reality only one subset of a group), leaving little space for those who might wish to pursue a more broadly defined agenda. Tabar et al (2003: 273) trace this back to the Whitlam Labor Government in the 1970s, who they argue, ‘ethnicised’ migrants by recognising ‘ethnic communities’ as ‘disadvantaged’ groups. Consequently, ethnicity became a ‘valorised cultural element’ and an object of struggle by members of the ‘ethnic community’. In order to receive government funding and recognition, community organisations had to demonstrate that they represented a coherent and unified ethnic ‘community’. Maintaining these definitions of community then became essential for consolidating the legitimacy and influence of these organisations and their leaders.

This means that although some of these organisations do espouse an anti-racism agenda, it is often defensive and self-serving, devoid of a larger vision for social justice. There is a strikingly low level of cross-ethnic solidarity among migrant community groups, as seen, for example, in the lack of support for asylum seekers from those who prided themselves on *not*

having ‘queue-jumped’ into the country. Some attempts to defend a cultural minority have been otherwise spectacularly regressive, for example, the then Mufti of Australia, Sheik Taj el-din Al Hilaly, in 2006 defending Muslim men by characterising immodestly dressed women as ‘uncovered meat’ inviting sexual assault (Kerbaj 2006).

In this era of Islamophobia, Muslim community organisations have often become extremely defensive, responding to hostility by defending Islam at all costs. All too often this has led to essentialist and conservative definitions of Islam which do not provide strong foundations for a progressive anti-racist agenda. For example, as Shakira Hussein (2007) has shown, many Muslim women’s organisations have responded to attacks on the hijab by mobilising a simplistic and essentialist discourse of the hijab as liberatory. This entraps debates into a dangerous ‘force’ vs ‘choice’ dichotomy that fails to capture the realities of negotiation and multiple meanings of hijab wearing.

With all of these complexities surrounding the politics of ethnic community organisations, there is a real danger that uncritical collaboration may end up consolidating the power of conservatives within minority communities, further marginalising those who are less powerful within these communities. This point was made compellingly by Shakira Hussein and Alia Imtoul in their address to the *Beyond the Neo-Con Men* conference last year. Hussein and Imtoul challenged the tendency of anti-racists (among others) to search for ‘real Muslims’ who represent the ‘mainstream Muslim community’, invariably stereotyped as socially conservative.

Ironically, they argued, ‘some of the most conservative elements of Muslim communities have received validation in the form of recognition conferred by socially progressive non-Muslims’ (Hussein and Imtoul 2008). Activists often allied themselves with people or organisations with whom they had little in common, all the while suppressing their misgivings about their new partners’ sometimes ‘unedifying opinions’, particularly relating to gender and sexuality, ‘because the goal of building anti-racist alliances seems more pressing than the goal of understanding Islam as having diverse expressions’ (Hussein and Imtoul 2008).

This means that Muslims with progressive political values can be overlooked, as they are seen as atypical or inauthentic Muslims. Hussein and Imtoul recounted how they had

themselves experienced this, being 'bypassed by those who share our broad political outlook, because they believe that this viewpoint does not represent the typical Muslim'. But the category of the 'typical Muslim' is as meaningless as that of the 'typical Australian'. Sadly though, when the stereotype of Muslims being inherently socially conservative informs activists' search for allies, this can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Hussein and Imtoul 2008).

Tara Povey's paper in this volume examines some of these issues with particular reference to Muslim and Arab women, showing how stereotypes of these women as passive victims in need of 'rescuing', which can be traced to colonial times, continue to frame activist strategies. In the post-Cold War era, a 'politics of pity' has replaced political resistance and solidarity more generally, she argues. In documenting the activist work of women in Iran and Afghanistan, for example, establishing independent schools focusing on girls' education, Povey challenges the image of the powerless and oppressed Muslim woman.

Ironically though, in Western countries such as Australia and the US, societies that have trumpeted their gender equality as a mark of cultural superiority over Islamic societies, there is much less space for Muslim women's activism. Since 9/11, Muslim women in the West have been living under a form of Islamophobia that defines them as both oppressed and potential threats to national security. Consequently, the scope for Muslim women's activism is dramatically reduced, and political activity can become quite individualised, for example, in the simple act of wearing a headscarf.

Povey's paper reminds activists seeking cross-cultural alliances to first seek an understanding of the complex material and political circumstances of Muslims and Arabs living in the West. Like Hussein and Imtoul, Povey points to the difficulties of such alliances in an era of rampant Islamophobia.

In his paper, Dinesh Wadiwel takes this note of caution further, posing some provocative questions about whether solidarity is in fact possible at all. While cross-cultural solidarity and alliances are generally seen as inherently desirable, Wadiwel argues that uncritical statements of solidarity can hide an underlying reality of conflict and even a state of war. He explores the notion that perhaps 'we don't have any common ground; that our starting point suggests

we have no reason to work with each other; that we have no natural affiliations, perhaps no common enemy. Indeed you and I might be considered enemies’.

In a profound critique of liberal ideals of civil society and inter-personal dialogue and friendship as tools for equality and democracy, Wadiwel shows that the public sphere is often not civil at all, and expressions of solidarity can have the effect of preventing recognition of continuing conflict. He uses the example of the widespread practice at public events of acknowledging Indigenous ownership of land:

An acknowledgement of prior sovereignty hides the truth of war within it: the fact that I stand on this land because war has occurred, and continues to this day... Really I should acknowledge that a war has occurred, a war that continues today, a war that I am inescapably part of, because I stand here.

Against the prevailing assumptions that solidarity comprises natural relationships of easy friendship, Wadiwel retorts that such relationships are almost never symmetrical, and that some parties always benefit more than others. Failure to recognise this reality can mean that activist collaborations simply ‘intensify war’ between people unequally positioned in a society marked by division.

The final paper in this section, by James Arvanitakis, also challenges the idea that a ‘natural’ community can emerge from those ‘with a shared experience of hurt’. The assumption that all who have experienced racism have a common interest can be dangerous when the reality of collaboration entails exclusion and even betrayal. This can happen when ‘those with the greatest hurt can claim to be an exclusive group based on their distance from whiteness: they become the “gatekeepers” who refuse to allow others the same status’.

As an ‘almost white’ male, Arvanitakis asks whether his claims of being hurt by racism can be recognised by those who may have experienced greater hurt, and how this shapes the possibilities for collaboration. Ultimately, Arvanitakis calls for activists to move away from this kind of thinking altogether, as he argues, communities based on a ‘hierarchy of hurt’ simply reinforce the very logic of whiteness that anti-racists are trying to eradicate. Activists need to resist the urge to seek out people ‘like us’ for collaboration, and build communities based on a sharing of difference.

Overall, the papers in this section provide a range of perspectives on the question of cross-cultural activist collaboration. All show the challenges and complexity of working across difference, and point to various strategies to avoid the negative unintended consequences of uncritical solidarity, which can lead to new relationships of exclusion. Exposing these challenges is not intended to discourage cross-cultural collaboration, but rather to provide activists with some tools for thinking through a complex process, so that the result may more closely resemble genuinely productive, inclusive and respectful alliance-building.

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