A Quintessential Collision: critical dimensions of the Vietnamese presence in the Australia empire project

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Abstract

The Vietnamese arrival and integration into Australia represents a quintessential case of cultures in collision. In 1975 there was effectively no Vietnamese presence. Over the next twenty five years the community grew to over two hundred thousand members. Before 1975 Vietnam and Australia barely knew each other – except through the prism of the American War. By 2001 Generation 2 were a significant part of Australian political, economic and cultural life. The Vietnamese were used as the trigger for the end of the bi-partisanship on multiculturalism at the end of the 1970s, were implicated in the rising paranoia about unsafe cities in the 1980s, and centrally embroiled in the emergence of a politics of race in the 1990s. They also reflect two trajectories of integration – the anomie associated with marginalization, and the trans-national engagement associated with globalizing elites. This paper explores processes of cultural collision and reconstitution through an examination of three dimensions of the Vietnamese in Australia - the criminal world of the heroin trade; the rise and fall of Phuong Ngo; and the celebration of Generation 2.

Note: this is a draft for discussion. Full references in final paper

Introduction

In July 2002 three young men of Vietnamese background died in an attack by a group of five young men of similar background outside a Melbourne nightclub. The tragedy was fully reported in The Age newspaper, which also was careful to refrain from using ethnic descriptors in presenting the facts of the case. The paper also indicated the strong support for police investigations from the Vietnamese community. Twenty six years before an Age writer, Bruce Grant, had documented the first publicized arrival of the Vietnamese in Australia, three young men on a boat fleeing Communist Vietnam, tying up at a wharf in Darwin. There was a sad symmetry of the images – hope and death.

Yet in that quarter decade a social revolution had occurred in Australia; from a society with White Australia as a recent and avowedly racist population selection policy, to an egalitarian policy now avowedly non-racist; from a society in which Asian faces were still extraordinary, to one where visible diversity is everywhere; and from a society with little sense of non-European cultures and traditions, to one where every Buddha's birthday has senior politicians lining up to be seen at Vietnamese temples.

The Vietnamese arrival and settlement process provides an almost archetypal case of cultures in collision, emerging from a situation of distance and ignorance, to one of engagement, cultural interaction and emerging forms of hybridity. In 1975 there was effectively no Vietnamese presence (the majority were war orphans adopted by Australian parents – now developing their own politics of cultural identity). Over the next twenty five years the community grew to over two hundred thousand members. Before 1975 Vietnam and Australia barely knew each other – except through the prism of the American War. By 2001 Generation 2 were a significant part of Australian political, economic and cultural life. Indeed the 2003 Centenary Awards identified eight Vietnamese Australians for recognition – from SBS radio's Quang Luu to Fairfield Unity Party councillor Thang Ngo.

The Vietnamese communities have played a significant role in broader engagements in Australian politics and society – though not necessarily at their behest. The Vietnamese were used as the trigger for the real end of White Australia in the late 1970s, while later their

presence was mobilized as evidence in support of the abandonment of bi-partisanship on multiculturalism in the early 1980s. They were implicated in the rising paranoia about unsafe cities in the late1980s, where Vietnamese became a popular indicator for the presence of violent and drug-related crime. They were centrally embroiled in the emergence of a politics of race in the 1990s, providing case studies for the vehement demagoguery of the One Nation party and their allies, while also providing widespread support for Australia's first significant antiracist political party, Unity.

The Vietnamese community also demonstrates two ideal-type trajectories of integration – one that reflects the anomie associated with marginalization, broken lives, and poverty; and the other that demonstrates the trans-national engagement associated with globalizing elites, high levels of education, and entry into the controlling professions of the society. It is not surprising therefore that the Vietnamese have drawn a fair amount of attention from social scientists and scholars interested in the ways in which cultural interaction, adaptation and change occur. They were refugees from a colonial society escaping the aftermath of civil war, and entered a society that had been a protagonist on one side of that war. Many in the host society had hoped the war had been fought so that the population of Vietnam would stay in their own country (the fear of the falling dominoes of south east Asian communism and its threat to Australia in terms of both race and ideology), while others had supported the forces that won the war and triggered the exodus.

Penetration Phobia

There has been considerable debate about the nature of Australian nationalism and nation building, particularly through the tensions created by the apparent disjunctions of history and geography. As a colonial society generated in the period of the great imperialist competitions of the nineteenth century, accepting modern nationhood while still responding to the imperial imperatives of Great Britain, Australia has faced two unresolved consequences of its colonized past. They are both different faces of what I would call the Australian empire project, the successful imposition in a new land of a cultural, political and economic system that privileges and secures the interests of the colonizing peoples.

The first of these imperatives remains the effective subjugation of the original nations, and their incorporation into each of the three subsystems. Much of contemporary debate about Indigenous issues reflects the 'unfinished business' – both for the empire project and the people subject to it. I would suggest that the instability of this part of the project contributes to the instability in the second imperative – the defence of the original imperial peoples against competing external empires (understood as cultural systems rather than militarily driven state invasions). The strategy has been presented as multiculturalism (since about 1975) and has sought to suppress the racial nature of Australian nationhood, through assertions of commitments to modern values of equality in cultural relations, and capacity to contribute to economic development in immigration policies.

The Vietnamese presence in Australia has contributed to and revealed the deep instability of the empire project, yet has also highlighted its resilience and capacity to adapt to and incorporate potential threats. In the process of incorporation (what used to be described as assimiliation) the micro-social engagements have produced ructions, created and destroyed political movements, transformed the social ecology of cities, and challenged the basis for a racially defined nationhood (c.f. Hage "White Nation").

Because of these unresolved elements of the project, there remains that sense of a nation permeated by vulnerability and inauthenticity, which we see today expressed in border protection strategies – so-called 'penetration phobia'. This phobia refers to the loathing of unauthorized arrivals, who breach the protective skin around the body politic, and enter it as though a virus. Why is this phobia so intense – perhaps because it echoes the form of the original imperial invasion, with its unannounced arrivals and unauthorized seizures of land?

This is said by way of prelude to an analysis of the arrival and settlement of the Vietnamese people in Australia after 1976. We cannot understand the intense insecurity, the adaptation and polarization of the Vietnamese experience in Australia and the Australian experience of

the Vietnamese, without this preliminary statement about context. In discussing the Vietnamese arrival we are dealing with two major processes of cultural trauma – that experienced by the Vietnamese, and that by the wider Australian society. It is important to understand these traumas as deeply interwoven with the continuation of the imperial project of the Australian state.

Cultural trauma

Explanatory discourses are political engagements with the contemporary world as much as with the past. How we describe and then explain critical events tells us much about wider issues of social order and cohesion. The Vietnamese story is a fascinating one for it reveals just how powerful the initial moments of 'naming' are for the future playing out of social relations. How did the Australian concern for the stability of the empire project (as in alliance with the USA in the Vietnam war) produce consequences that contributed to the instability of that project? Who were the victims/heroes of the Vietnamese experience – the refugees or the society that opened to them? Who were the victims/ perpetrators of cultural oppression – the Vietnamese forced to adapt in the face of Australian racism, or the culturally and communally fragile working class of the 'host' society suddenly 'inundated' by strangers they could not understand, or again, the political class of Australia, responding to politically correct internationalism at the cost of social harmony and traditional community at home?

Even to ask these questions stirs the emotions, raises hackles, generates problems in the use of language that can be seen as an expression of racism. The process of the labeling of events by political and communal leaders can be critical in how the future relations develop. If the outsiders are identified as a threat to 'social cohesion' (the words used in the late 1980s by John Howard as opposition leader to refer to the dangers posed by Asian settlement) then the threat will be amplified and the discourses harden into vehement hostilities focused on differences and deviancy. On the other hand if the outsiders are seen as strengthening the depth of the cultural resources of the community (as Prime Minister Bob Hawke argued at the time under the guidance of Peter Shergold, then head of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, now head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet) the level of perceived threat is reduced. Criminal deviance can then be seen as a minority activity, requiring normal social control strategies, rather than reflecting the essential differences between communities, or defining the core of the 'Other's' culture.

I now want to explore the way in which the Vietnamese presence in Australia has been brought into the Australian empire project, how the sharp disjunctions of the early period has been normalized into the pattern of contemporary Australian socio-political discourses.

The Vietnamese arrive

It was almost an accident of history that two events coincided which made it possible for a Vietnamese settlement to occur – though the traumas in Australia associated with the Vietnam war affected both of them. The first element was the increasing movement towards ending race as the basis of immigration and settlement – the end of White Australia. By 1966 Australia had signed the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Educated, English-speaking Asians were being accepted – reflecting the idea of orientation to modernity as the organizing principle around which race could be reduced as a criterion of population selection. A modernizing nation would accept modernized populations, as they were expected to share values of democracy and economic productivity, and be bearers of significant stores of human capital (created by the investment by their states of origin). The new ALP government in 1973 withdrew all racial references in the Immigration Act, expecting that the modernity model of non-White immigration would continue as the norm. Indeed a central ideological tenet of global modernity was created for this purpose, the concept of multiculturalism and its programmatic implementation.

However within two years the defeat of the US forces and the collapse of their South Vietnamese allies created a new factor – for both those Vietnamese for whom life in Vietnam was becoming very dangerous (though they were not an immigrant peoples in the way for instance the Chinese and Japanese had been since the nineteenth century,); and for

Australians (who hoped the end of the war would mean that the Vietnamese would work out their own problems in Vietnam). The following table indicates the rapidity of the changes that would take place.

Census Year	Born in Vietnam	% change	2nd generation	Speak Vietnamese	%change	%Aust born speaking Vietnamese
1976	2427					
1981	41096			N/a		
1986	83028	100		N/a		
1991	121813	50	25151	110817		16
1996	150941	25	46756	146265	30	26
2001	154831	3	N/a	174236	20	

Note: high proportion of Vietnamese born in Australia and their descendants are Chinese speakers.

Initially the Australian government was reluctant to get involved with the inflow of refugees – though some hundreds of former government officials and others arrived at US behest under the ALP government. The then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, who had been strenuously opposed to Australian involvement in the war, and cancelled conscription soon after his election in 1972, was reported by colleagues (e.g. Clyde Cameron) as being scathing about the refugees – saying "I am not having thousands of fucking Vietnamese Balts coming to this country" , and "Vietnamese sob stories don't wring my withers". (Interestingly the debate over Whitlam's position continues with a vigorous interchange between Whitlam and the Sydney Institute's Gerard Henderson – formerly an adviser to Fraser - over the matter in recent issues of the Sydney Papers in 2003).

While the ALP leader reflected views widely held in the Labor movement, it was not to be the ALP government that had to deal with the issue of border penetration. In April 1976, when the fishing boat KG4435 tied up at a wharf in Darwin, the Prime Minister was Liberal Malcolm Fraser (Army minister during the Vietnam War). The boat was the first sign of what had been happening throughout southeast Asia – people sailing out of Vietnam to wherever would take them; if they survived pirates, storms and unsafe boats. Many of the boats that began to arrive in Australia had been refuelled in Malaysia and then sent on their way. Evidence soon emerged that the exodus was being facilitated by the new Vietnamese government, happy to rid itself of political opponents, and collect their valuables in the process. The first arrivals tended to be those most likely to find the new regime difficult, and best equipped to leave – more Chinese, Catholic, urban, educated, elite. They were followed by a broader cross-section of Vietnamese society as the political regime tightened inside Vietnam. Most of these refugees were not in fact boat people – but rather people being processed through refugee camps.

Inside Australia social tensions were becoming apparent. Some pressure was mounting from anti-Communist groups such as the Association for Cultural Freedom, to have the Fraser government open up to refugees (Robert Manne remembers that his group was pressing for an intake of 3,000 p.a., which they thought was the furthest they could argue). On the streets National Action appeared as a social presence, with its figurehead Ross May (the Skull) appearing at refugee camps in Sydney and Wollongong, organising sticker a and leaflet campaigns against 'the Asian invasion'.

Fraser's government became involved in the international attempts to broker a deal with both Vietnam and the countries of first refuge. If the countries would no longer refuel the boats and send them on their way whilly-nilly towards the undefended north Australian coast, then Australia would take 15,000 refugees a year from the camps – far beyond the wildest dreams of the pro-refugee groups. However the Australian government would choose those refugees it wanted in relation to their 'fit' with Australian priorities – thus attempting the sustain the modernity framework for population intake (and in the process minimise those with disabilities etc. who might be a long term cost to Australia). Fraser's priorities were to get the story of the boat people off the front pages – and manage the entry in an orderly way (in conjunction with

the Vietnamese government's orderly departure program). Over the decade from 1981 to 1991, the average Vietnamese intake stood at 8,000 per year, fluctuating depending on specific circumstances. Between 1975 and 1988 about 2000 Indochinese arrived by boat – though 55000 arrived in legal resettlement schemes between 1975 and 1982. Indeed the policy worked so well (in relation to penetration phobia if not elsewhere) that there were no unauthorised boat arrivals between 1981 and 1989.

Once the first wave of refugees had been contained and a system found to process them, Australia sought ways to manage the continuing pressures – especially as Vietnam was no longer an enemy. The Refugee Convention criteria that had given effective blanket access up to 1982 underwent changes – especially when the ALP returned to government in 1983. Claimants had to make an individual case, and increasingly the economic dimensions of the situation emerged – the political issues in Vietnam no longer of major concern to the Australian government. By the end of the 1980s the attempts by western countries to develop 'humane deterrence' generated a fresh rush to escape from Vietnam before the gates closed.

The July 1989 International conference adopted a Comprehensive Plan of Action that would have the effect of reducing the acceptance rate, increasing delays, and leaving about 40,000 rejected applicants in camps who refused to go back to Vietnam. In the wake of this situation the boats began to arrive again, with about 2000 Indochinese arriving between 1989 and 1995, though the Vietnamese were few in numbers (until the 1994 Behei Chinese from North Vietnam). The situation they faced had changed dramatically – with arrivals now detained in camps in remote parts of Australia, and facing arduous checks on their bonafides. When a couple walked out of one camp in 1992, security was intensified, based on a supposition that all unauthorised arrivals might seek to escape from lawful custody. All unauthorized arrivals therefore and thereon had to be interned under high security.

By 1996 Vietnamese immigration had effectively ceased – tough new rules on family re-union made by the Howard government (elected in 1996) meant that there was a nett increases of less than 4000 over the 1996/2001 Census period. Meanwhile the community was reflecting many of the characteristics of a mature group – for instance by 2001 over one in four Vietnamese speakers was Australian born, while in 1996 86% of Vietnamese had taken out Australian citizenship.

Australian responses

I want now to concentrate on how the Vietnamese presence has been dealt with in Australian political culture through the exploration of a number of apparent crises and then through three rather different slices into the body politic. In presenting this material I want to recognise the extraordinary work of Mandy Thomas whose analytical narratives of Vietnamese lives in Australia sets the context for this introductory discussion.

There are many models of immigrant/host contact, conflict, adaptation and coexistence – starting with monumental studies undertaken by Robert Park and his colleagues in Chicago in the 1920s. I don't want to summarise this literature here, but rather to note that there are broad paradigms now fairly widely accepted that look at the interaction between people as the framework for analysis – and the structural fall-out from this interaction for an understanding of longer term implications (especially for policy interventions).

Thomas' work demonstrates the processes that operate within the community – the role of memory, the links to place, the need to recreate identity, the changing status and lifestyle, the struggles for economic survival, the vulnerability and the strengths. She shows how the expectations and pressures of the new society penetrate and affect gender relations, intergenerational power, and senses of self and personal possibility. She explores the effect of being a refugee on the desire for security, and she alludes to the ambiguous relationship with the homeland – desire and rejection, hope and fear. This combines with a sensitivity to the ambiguous qualities of the Australian community into which they are drawn – which welcomes, ignores, rejects, often in ways which are inexplicable yet inseparable.

It is helpful to think of the Australian (a broad and problematically undifferentiated term that applies an impossible unanimity) response to the Vietnamese presence in three key periods, and organised around three themes – crime, corruption and success.

'Social Cohesion'

Once Fraser had committed to taking the Vietnamese refugees, he was able to call on a shared liberal value set among his supporters in the Coalition, and the various spokespeople for the ALP Opposition, to fuse a solid wall of commitment to multiculturalism as the state ideology of intercommunal relations. Under this approach there was little argument about the Vietnamese policy at the level of parliamentary debate – other than to stress the need for services and the pressures to which government should respond.

This did not mean that the Vietnamese presence was uncontentious – nor that local neighbourhoods were not points of potential conflict. Given the history of Vietnamese immigration – primarily as refugees supported by the Australian government – most settlement occurred in localities around the large migration centres. These were already in localities of high immigrant settlement from previous waves – such as among the Italians, Russians and Yugoslavs of Cabramatta and Fairfield in Sydney. The dispersion that had occurred with the earlier postwar immigrants, moving into areas of secondary settlement, was not evident in the early years of the Vietnamese arrival. The most dramatic increase in the Vietnamese presence took place in the five years from 1981 to 1986 – when the size of the community doubled. It was during this period that the first major public fallout occurred.

When Labor regained federal power in 1983, the fragile alliance between pro-multiculturalists in the Fraser government (including Fraser himself) and the ALP fell apart. The liberal wing of the conservative parties came under sustained attack from the new right – neo-conservative and free market ideologues, and lost much of its authority over policy. Meanwhile the new Hawke government came under internal pressure to contain the multicultural commitments – no more so than during the vigorous arguments about the impact of Asian migration following the Geoffrey Blainey intervention of 1984. The Vietnamese were presented during that debate as the most alien of any immigrants – and the cause of what came to be called the 'undermining of social cohesion'.

'Social cohesion' was after all a central concern of the empire project – what sort of deal needed to be struck with incomers to ensure that the social order was not destabilised? The original strategies of assimilation had faltered as they did not address the realities of communal processes of survival and the critical role of culture in human identity and social engagement. Multiculturalism had emerged because it seemed to offer exactly that combination of smaller group social clumping necessary for identity and mutual support, and individual affirmation of the political integrity of the nation state as the paramount authority. But criticisms suggested that it failed at the point the culturally diverse groups were disconnected along a modernity/tradition trajectory; that is where the cultural orientations of the various groups did not incorporate the appropriate balance between gemeinschaft/ gesellschaft deemed necessary for the modernist enterprise to succeed. The Vietnamese – though not named as such – represented to the old Australian mind a pre-modern form of sociation, that thereby posed a fundamental challenge to national solidarity based on individual citizenship.

This challenge would be identified most clearly by ideologues of the neo-conservative right – who saw multiculturalism as a dangerous path that could only rigidify communalism at the expense of individuality (e.g. Knopfelmacher, Chipman). Blainey was to capture this view through his critical use of the 'tribalisation' of Australian society – a term amplified by many other commentators (and clearly racist in its connotations). These tribalised Vietnamese were said to be a society apart, with few economic skills, poor English language levels, and rampant crime.

The ALP government was disturbed by these issues, particularly as the localised points of tension were nearly all in ALP held seats. One response by the ALP was directed externally. Viviani reported that one senior ALP senator encapsulated the emerging policy in relation to

new arrivals as "defend, deter, detain". Such an aggressive apparently externally focussed stance also carried the internal message of hostility to the new arrivals. Yet the settlement policy was ostensibly welcoming and supportive. Such a discursive contradiction demonstrated the unstable basis for the whole system of cultural relations.

As the Vietnamese presence continued to grow – no longer primarily refugees but now orderly departure immigrants – the normalising of the population change process intensified local antagonisms. The popular press made much of what was seen as an emerging crime problem, though an Australian Institute of Criminology study in 1987 found that the situation was much less fearsome than the public discourse might suggest. For instance, Vietnamese minors were 50% less likely to offend than the community norm; unaccompanied minors were even less likely to offend; while the rate was rising it was still very much lower than the community norm, and Vietnamese had a very much lower violent crime rate; drug offences in 1987 were 75% of the norm; and the suburbs in which the Vietnamese were concentrated had less crime than before their arrival. Even so, youth crime became the trope through which the fears about social cohesion were voiced.

By 1988 Howard was openly voicing the social cohesion fears, and even the short opposition period under Peacock, one of the last liberal Liberals, saw the abandonment of multiculturalism as a Coalition policy position. How then could these matters be addressed? After the re-appearance of refugee boats in 1989, the main emphasis turned once more to defending the borders and aggressively dissuading potential unauthorised arrivals. Public discourses expressed hostility to the boat people and implied that the apparent untrustworthiness of Asians should be applied to the whole settled community – this was the regular fare of talk back radio in Sydney, and to some extent in Perth.

Over the following decade the social cohesion issue became the base for much of the debate about migration and settlement. For most of the decade after the Blainey intervention, the focus was on the Vietnamese communities of Sydney and Melbourne. The social cohesion argument was extended in the wake of the proposal from Monash University's Centre for Population and Urban Research, that the Vietnamese were forming part of an emerging structural underclass. The Centre's prime protagonists – Bob Birrell and Ernest Healey - proposed that the constant inflow of 'recent migrants who lack the skills to compete in the contemporary labour market' (Healey People and Place 6:1) was contributing to the sedimentation of poverty, and this was most evident among the Vietnamese in Sydney. The polarisation of income groups had accelerated from 1976 to 1991, and intensified over the next five years. This period paralleled the rise in Vietnamese immigration; the impact of this polarisation was most evident amongst the Vietnamese, and by implication may indeed have been a consequence of their presence.

The structural underclass issue was to have major consequences for the whole debate about the nature of Australian democracy, the ethnicisation or racialisation of social class, and the role of immigration in generating social inequality. Simply put, the Monash argument implied that the desire of the Australian state to advance its role as a state vis a vis other states in the global political system (the external imperial project) significantly disturbed its capacity to build an egalitarian and racially unmarked democracy inside Australia (the internal imperial project). Furthermore, it suggests that as the globalisation of the Australian economy advanced, the costs of this globalisation were born most painfully by the most marginalised groups – exactly those sectors 'rescued' by the Australian state from the international maelstrom of south east Asian (and Middle East) population sinks. Indeed in the 1996 census figures used in the studies, Lebanon and Vietnam had the highest rates of low paid men in communities of significant size – both originally refugee communities.

Thus the Monash argument (the main opponents of whom was Viviani who attempted to critique its spatial ghettoisation premises, and Jupp who argued it was ahistorical and victim-blaming) suggested that a deep-seated structural bifurcation of Australian cities was becoming apparent, with the most disadvantaged clearly racially marked. If this were true it would indicate the abject failure of multiculturalism, which as a policy was predicated on cultural affirmation policies as a pathway to the avoidance of social and economic structural inequality.

The Monash line has had clear consequences – not necessarily those intended by the researchers. It has allowed the causes of Vietnamese poverty to be located in the characteristics of the Vietnamese population, rather than in racist responses from the Australian social and economic systems to their presence. Furthermore it has relieved governments of any sense of responsibility for the situation. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs in its profile of the Vietnam-born community, was quite comfortable about accepting that public hostility to the Vietnamese could be explained (or justified – the language is ambiguous) by reference to their mode of arrival ('in boats'), their limited English and lack of skills that could equip them to adjust to work and life in Australia, their therefore inevitable high levels of unemployment and economic disadvantage, and their residential concentration. Given that their access to employment support, English language classes and communal support were all victims of economic rationalist cuts to government programs, the redirection of the responsibility onto the Vietnamese themselves demonstrates an ideological sleight of hand.

A final part of the social cohesion argument lies in its implications for the future. The Monash researchers fear the deepening of the underclass, and urge that no more poor and uneducated non-English speakers should be allowed in – especially not through family reunion. The government has made family reunion almost impossible without major financial guarantees by sponsors, so in this sense the Monash fear has been addressed.

The other implications of the Monash analysis have not been taken up – if anything they have been studiously ignored. Programs addressing English needs (the apparent sine qua non of effective participation in the labour market) barely exist, especially for older and poorly educated people. Programs that affirm the Vietnamese as part of the wider Australian community barely exist. And adult education programs to re-skill and advance the capacity for labour market participation have been marginalised in most TAFE systems (reflected in very low rates of technical qualification among the Vietnamese).

Crime returns

During the mid 1990s the crime issue in the Vietnamese community re-surfaced (not that it had ever disappeared). The earlier more up-beat attempts to demonstrate that public fears were not supported by hard evidence, gave way to a recognition that the long-term economic marginalisation of Vietnamese youth, especially young men, had created the perfect conditions for the development of a culture of criminality in centres of Vietnamese settlement (though not clearly only there). The policy issue then became, is this rising crime a characteristic of the Vietnamese culture displaced to Australia (ie street gangs of Saigon), or a phenomenon associated with structurally excluded communities in large cities where mobility is blocked by structures of pre-existing racial privilege?

Robert Merton first theorised such situations in his studies in the 1940s of anomie and alienation in ethnic neighbourhoods of Chicago, and reflected on a sociological modelling of dis/organised crime. Merton proposed models of adaptation by immigrant communities facing existing hierarchies of status and privilege that produced dysfunctional outcomes he labelled as 'alienation' and 'anomie', drawing on but going beyond Durkheim's theoretical conclusions about the dynamics of suicide. Merton argued for a model that linked personal values and aspirations to social structure and mobility pathways. He suggested that the critical link was between aspiration and opportunity. 'Anomie' occurred where individuals had internalised wider societal values and aspirations but found that the legitimate pathways to achieve those goals were blocked – thus leading to the development of alternative pathways and structures. 'Alienation' referred to a process when the very values of the wider society were rejected, and alternative values with little chance of their realisation, emerged.

Asian organised crime has developed as a matter of wide policy concern over the past decade. Mukherjee of the Australian Institute of Criminology (1999) refers to the inheritance by new immigrants from 'some source countries' of 'disorganised communities', a signal of likely crime problems. On the other hand, while great attention was paid to crime by migrants,

little attention was paid to crime against migrants, suggesting that policy concerns were directed at defence of privilege, rather than social justice.

Mukherjee did demonstrate some important dimensions of the Vietnamese involvement in crime. Drawing on Victorian police reports, Vietnamese-born offenders processed for all crimes increased by nearly 40% from 1993/94 to 1997/97 – compared with a state rise of about 2%. Violent crime fell from about 350 offenders to 200, while drug offences rose from 220 to 1000. The question Mukherjee's study raises is this – does the rise in drug arrests represent a rise in criminal behaviours, or a racial targeting by police of Vietnamese youth, driven by public hysteria about the community and lawlessness? There is no clear answer here, but the figures suggest the changing level of police attention, rather than a major criminal outburst (in the sense that drug offences are not normally reported to the police, whereas violence and property crimes have clear victims).

A Commonwealth Parliamentary inquiry in 1995 into Asian Organised Crime made particular reference to the Vietnamese involvement in crime. In a detailed summary they identified a range of claims by police and law enforcement bodies across Australia, indicating that Vietnamese gangs were involved in heroin importation, sales and distribution, extortion, and home invasions. The section on the Vietnamese, having reported the full range of claims, quotes another Strategic Intelligence Assessment from 1991, to the effect that every community has some members involved in crime, and focussing attention on a community will tend to expand information about it, and the further attention paid to it. Even so the concerns about the gangs in the Vietnamese community were widely held, and fuelled the growing antipathy to the community (though not sufficiently to be of interest to the Community profile group at DIMIA).

Since 1996 the increasingly racialised political discourses of social order (exemplified in the One Nation party and its constant focus on Asian crime) has intensified the public perceptions of links between Asian and particularly Vietnamese communities and organised crime. The drug focus and the constant naming of Spingvale and Footscray in Melbourne, and Cabramatta in Sydney as both Vietnamese and drug centres, has made the conceptual link between the community and crime very hard to dissolve. The demand by community leaders for effective policing, better community/police links, eradication of police corruption, and action on social programs, has had some impact – though in the case of Cabramatta, it may simply had the effect of moving the behaviours to a different neighbourhood.

In an online discussion following a 2001 Sixty Minutes TV program on organised crime in Cabramatta, Det Sgt Tim Priest, who had been a major advocate of increased policing and more aggressive judicial action (greater punitive responses) in the area, said this of the situation:

'My experience is that these gangs are bound together by ethnicity and many of these immigrant youths have nothing else to look forward to in this country but to form a brotherhood type of arrangement with similar youths of the same nationality. So what I'm really saying is these kids are disenfranchised for whatever reason from mainstream Australia and it's almost like the only hope they hold is to form alliances with kids in a similar situation…. it is important to realise that they are just being used to carry out the orders of, quite often legitimate, businessmen. They're simply a tool of trade for the gang leaders. Teenagers, by their very nature, are the ones most vulnerable when lured into gangs which promise cash, women, an action-packed life, so to speak, but essentially, gangs need teenagers as foot soldiers — they cannot operate otherwise…. In my experience, many of the kids I've dealt with in these gangs have almost no parental guidance or responsibility. Anyway, they come from dysfunctional families almost as though they are doomed from the very start….The emergence of Triad gangs is something that worries me very deeply because they are far more organised and brutal than anything we've ever seen, and they quite often use Vietnamese gangs as their foot soldiers'.

In NSW the Cabramatta policing debate has become a major focus for government action; in 2001 attempts were made to downplay the issues. In 2002, under a new police minister and education minister, the 'crisis' in gang membership was validated; in 2003 at the NSW state

election heavy policing of Cabramatta was claimed as the way forward by the victorious Labor premier.

The drug/ crime/gang nexus demonstrates that the underclass/social cohesion arguments raise important questions about causes and effects of social changes. The core political issue remains that of cultural relations – how do we explain the dynamics of cultures in collision. Tim Priest argued that the problem is that Asians don't understand Australian values – and behave in unacceptable ways. For him the way forward is communal responsibility (by parents), heavier zero-tolerance policing, and the expulsion of gang members to their countries of origin. But the cultural collision is more problematic than that.

 'Australia's first political assassination'

In 1994 Fairfield state MP John Newman was murdered outside his home. Four years later local ALP councilor Phuong Ngo was charged with his murder. The first trial was aborted when the Crown withdrew the case. The second trial failed when the jury could not agree on a verdict. At his third trial he was convicted of organizing the murder, but no one was convicted of carrying it out. The Crown alleged the motive for the killing was Ngo's desire to replace Newman as the local MP, and Newman's criticism of Asian gangs, with whom it was intimated Ngo was closely connected. Ngo's supporters claim that someone else has confessed to the crime, that Ngo had publicly stated he would not challenge Newman as he was on a promise of an Upper House seat from the ALP, and that he was set up for the charge in a climate of racism and public hysteria about organized Asian crime gangs and sinister unnamed background godfather-type figures.

The Phuong Ngo affair is a curious moment in Australian political history, and offers an extraordinary case study in cultural collision. Ngo had come to Australia in 1981, a refugee from Vietnam, and had become a businessman very well connected in the local community. He established the Mekong Club, a very successful community club deriving its income from poker machines. The club provided employment opportunities for local Vietnamese, and formed the basis of Ngo's power in the local area. He had become an independent councilor in 1991, and joined the ALP in 1993; he was not therefore eligible for pre-selection in 1994. He was an affable and ambitious man, not dissimilar to many other people drawn to the right wing Labor machine in NSW. He counted former ALP federal minister and machine guru Graham Richardson, and NSW machine apparatchik John Della Bosca among his network of connections – both would appear on his behalf at his trial.

Newman, of Yugoslav extraction, was a tough local politician, who had come out strongly against Vietnamese gangs in the area. These gangs had formed various earlier alliances with Australian and Chinese drug networks and then trumped them by increasing the purity of the heroin they made available. They also extended the number of addicts, plying their trade near schools. Media hysteria about them was growing, and Newman was often reported in his remarks criticizing their spread. Newman was a potential target for many attackers – with suggestions of his own links with organized crime as one of the motivations.

The investigations into Newman's death went on for some years – with associates of Ngo's being charged in the earlier trials as the actual murderers. However evidence was confusing, witnesses statements were changed, allegations surfaced in various directions, and in the end Ngo's sole conviction was an unsatisfactory resolution.

Once imprisoned Ngo was a regular target for media attention – his involvement in a Vietnamese New Year celebration while in prison was castigated by the media and then banned by the government; he was also targeted for allegedly continuing his political activities through drones on Fairfield council. Throughout the events Ngo declared his innocence.

Soon after his conviction, a low key campaign began to demand his release on the grounds of a Crown fit-up. His campaign was threatened with libel action when its website made allegations of misconduct against the Crown prosecutor. Public rallies were held where civil liberties activists and academics from local universities spoke on Ngo's behalf. The campaign

slowly gathers strength, though many in the Vietnamese community with whom I have spoken remain skeptical of both his innocence and his conviction.

Ngo became a symbol of the conflict between the Vietnamese experience of Australia, and the Australian consideration of the Vietnamese. Around him hung the aura of the 5T street gang of drug dealers and standover men; of the triads based in Hong Kong or the Chinatowns of Vietnam which sought to control the drug trade in Sydney; and the shadowland of ALP branchstacking and the foggy shape of corruption in political life. In the media he was used to epitomize a self-serving and exploitative approach to integration, that could then be used to explain all Vietnamese attempts to make good in Australia. He was, it was suggested, the ultimate expression of what is meant to be 'un-Australian', a man who had imported into the democratic and peaceful milieu of suburban Sydney the callous and murderous values of Saigon gangland. Those who support him see only a community minded and driven man who defended his community, and was the victim of a racist dominant social order willing to sacrifice him for their own political interests. The Ngo case goes to the heart of the realities of democratic pluralism in contemporary Australia.

Generation 2

In June 2002 in the outer Sydney suburb of Liverpool a group of twenty-something Vietnamese Australians created 'Viet Pop', a celebration of their experience as 'Generation 2'. Through music, performance, art and photography they sought to capture the multiplicity of identities, challenges and creative engagements that characterized their lives in this metropolis to which their parents had fled a generation before.

The DIMIA Vietnam-born profile alludes to this group:

> 'the education pattern of the Viet Nam-born is interesting as it represents two extremes. On the one hand high levels of university education clearly reflect the elite origins of those who came as refugees, and the desire of middle-class Viet Nam-born persons to improve themselves and 'get-ahead' in Australia.'

The DIMIA analysis implies that it is the class origin of the Vietnamese that determines their orientation towards education. Yet the situation is apparently even more dramatic amongst the second generation, where university attendance is very high – and where the parents are more likely to be poorly educated, though with a high press towards educational success for their children.

If the models of alienation and anomie work as an explanation for youth gang crime, how then to explain these other trajectories? Here the economic system still limits the rewards, while racism may still constrain opportunities. If Vietnamese culture produces crime (all the evidence from the period of early arrival indicates otherwise) then it should also be accepted as the basis for educational success. On the other hand, if it is the Australian responding environment that generates the press towards crime, then the same environment encourages educational pathways to mobility. Here lies the contradiction within many of the public discourses framing Viet Nam born people and their descendants.

The experience of Generation 2 points towards a bifurcation that is not simply extractable from the class background before migration of an earlier generation. Within Buddhist and Catholic Vietnamese communities, there is an assertion of the value of education, and the potential for individuals to realize their aspirations through education. In an Australian environment that encourages educational participation, in which a globally focused modernity permeates elite and middle class cultures, meritocratic rules of selection compete with racist structures of exclusion. These micro-tensions vibrate within the much broader tensions of an Australian empire project, which is increasingly geared towards survival in a globalizing world.

Some examples of the self perception of the issues and selves were displayed during the Viet Pop exhibition (mobilized by community arts worker Cuong Le) – the text panel concludes with the words ' "the search for identity" is what young Vietnamese Australians are'.

Many young Vietnamese in Australia are facing difficulty in finding the answer to the question : " Who Am I?". The answer could be: I am 100% Vietnamese I am 50% Vietnamese & 50% Australian I am 100% Australian That is why many people believe that young Vietnamese Australians see themselves divided into three separate groups. Yet, no matter what group they feel they belong to, they still find their assimilation to the Australian society uneasy. If they see themselves 100% Aussie, they will be seen by the others as "Lost Roots". Therefore, "The search for the Identity" is what young Vietnamese Australians are. **"Searching for Identity"**	**pop** Vipop

Conclusion

There is a generation of new voices emerging among young Vietnamese Australians, that reflects the complexity of cultural collision, interaction and adaptation. Community politicians such as Thang Ngo, public images of young Australia such as Thao Nguyen (an organizer of the Liverpool Viet Pop event) , and an increasingly active engagement with the media and wider society indicate that fundamental changes are also occurring within the broader Australian society. While the first generation of Vietnamese have been exposed to racism, exploitation and poverty, those of their children who have been able to utilize the education system are breaking clear of the constraints that locked in many of their parents and significant numbers of their peers.

An approach that places the Vietnamese experiences within a broader analysis of Australian struggles to manage its empire project may throw valuable light on how the contradictions and issues identified by researchers and public commentators have emerged, and what their likely trajectories may be under different sets of conditions. Given that globalization and its pressures on nation states will most likely continue, the pressures that currently bifurcate the Vietnamese communities will intensify. Thang Ngo has indicated recently that some Vietnamese community leaders have breathed a sigh of relief as the hysteria of media racism has refocused on the Lebanese Muslim communities in the wake of 911 and a series of rape trials. Furthermore other media inquiries and political campaigns have led to heavier policing of Cabramatta and similar areas that may reduce public anxiety about crime gangs.

Yet the deeply embedded disadvantage experienced by so many Vietnamese families is unlikely to disappear. As the community ages its welfare and support needs will expand. One its most valuable assets (and the basis of so much wider antipathy if DIMIA is to be believed), its tight geographical concentration, will then provide the source for the leadership and activism that will be required to maintain itself. At the points of cultural interaction – with both the global Vietnamese diaspora and the local Australian communities – cultural transformations are occurring. The challenge for sides of the cultural collision equation remains how to keep the pathways to communication open, and the continuing hybridity along the boundaries a creative and productive force.

Ends

References to follow in final paper
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