

Framing Dissent at Macquarie Fields

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Abstract

This article is both a reply to criticisms of the author's earlier work concerning the Macquarie Fields 'riots' of 2005 (Lee 2006, 2007) and an attempt to more clearly articulate how this dissent might best be conceptually framed. Specifically, the author addresses and responds to criticisms made by John Owen in this journal in two articles (Owen 2006, 2007). This article suggests that a range of approaches are needed in order to properly understand and critically interpret the events at Macquarie Fields and that these events need to be placed in the broadest possible socio-political and historical frameworks in order to avoid overtly reductive conclusions and indeed policy responses.

Introduction

It is the very fact of the force of law and order acting illegitimately which snaps the moral bind of the marginalized that is already strained and weakened by economic deprivation and inequality (Jock Young 1999:161).

I thank John Owen (2006, 2007) for his interest in my work on issues relating to the 2005 Macquarie Fields 'riot' (Lee 2005, 2006, 2007). In a recent article in this journal Owen (2007) presented *inter alia* something of a critique of my analysis of the dissent expressed in March 2005 by young and obviously aggrieved Macquarie Fields residents – and presumably others from outside the community who joined the fray. Owen argued that I (Lee 2006, 2007) am misguided in the suggestion that the dissent could be read through a lens of social isolation, exclusion and poor governance (Young 1999), or through a lens of 'the sociology of action' (McDonald 1999; Touraine 1997 cited in McDonald) and cultural criminology (Presdee 2000). Indeed, he suggested that work such as mine had supported and reinforced in the media the 'popular view that disadvantage, social stigma, riots and bad community publicity were part and parcel of one deeply embedded (and socially reproduced) cycle of socio-spatial depression' (Owen 2007:107). This article constitutes a response to this critique, but it is also an attempt to shift the debate into more constructive territory.

Active debate is of course the life-blood of the academy and should be celebrated. My aim here is not to stifle this but to employ it dialectically. In this reply I want to further explore the seemingly conflicting positions deployed to interpret this event to two ends. First, to more thoroughly map the supposed divergences between my approach (Lee 2006, 2007) and that of Owen (2006, 2007). And secondly, to explore convergences to ascertain whether theoretical or analytical common ground can be found. I undertake this task not in the spirit of contest or antagonism, but with the aim of moving our understanding of this event forward. However, in proceeding with this task I will inevitably feel compelled to 'set

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the record straight' in regard to Dr Owen's interpretation of my position(s). I begin by outlining the contours of this debate as it stands.

Moral Indignation and Social Exclusion

Owen (2006, 2007) argues that the dynamics of the riots and dissent should be read via the lens of *moral economy* or *moral indignation*. As Owen puts it:

The argument espoused in my article (2006) developed around a clarification of two different types of 'morality', one formulated in panic mode and one expressed by the crowd in 'indignation' mode. One might say this was as simple as looking at morality *from below* as distinct from seeing it *from above* (2007:110 italics in original).

Owen's project seeks to 'engage in the much more risky business of establishing a moral sense amongst the participants themselves' as opposed to the position taken in the moral panic (and other) literature that seeks to look only at the moral naming and shaming by powerful institutions (Owen 2007:107). Although critical of the moral panic position Owen does not dispense with this completely but reads it through, or incorporates it with, the broader lens of moral economy; one approach from *above*, the other from *below*. Thus, conflict between police and the policed (in this case, a rioting crowd) is rendered explicable in cases where shared moral protocols are broken as they were in the case of the events that led up to the riotous behaviour at Macquarie Fields. Owen's analysis draws on the work of E. P. Thompson (1993 cited in Owen 2007), Randall and Charlesworth (1996 cited in Owen 2007) and 'forty years of scholarship into popular protest by social historians' (Owen 2006:7); a worthy tradition indeed.

Thus, Owen seeks to understand or interpret the customs and 'lived environment of comprised practices, inherited expectations, rules, which both determined limits to usages and disclosed possibilities, norms and sanctions both of law and neighbourhood pressures' (Thompson cited in Owen 2006:7). Following this, analysis must focus not just on social reaction, an error Owen rightly accuses moral panic theorists of, but on the 'legitimate grievance' of residents and their moral indignation in response to the events that transpire; in this case the deaths of two young men in a police pursuit and police (or perceived police) involvement in this. The analysis of custom and norms and the like would also presumably situate this in the context of a continuum of 'mutual suspicion' built up between the community (or segments of the community) and police. In this sense Owen's analysis focuses heavily on community/police interactions and the dynamics of these.

Owen's original article 'Moral Indignation and the Rioting Crowd at Macquarie Fields' appeared in the July 2006 issue of this journal. Arguing for the theoretical position of moral indignation/economy Owen (2006:7) summarily characterised media statements by myself and others as unhelpful in explaining the genesis of the dissent (Burchell in *SMH* 2005; Bounds in *SMH* 2005a; Morgan in *SMH* 2005; Lee 2005). In regard to my own short opinion piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Lee 2005) he noted, 'Murray Lee managed to touch on all matters peripheral to the question'. What struck me about the critique launched by Owen (2006) at the media statements of myself (and others) was that none of these positions were seen to supplement Owen's own argument; that it was impossible for these positions to speak to one another. Surely there is room for hybridising approaches, for looking at the same issue through multiple lenses in order to grasp its complexity (see e.g. Garland 1990 or Braithwaite 1989)? My own predilection has always been one of theory as a toolbox rather than a straightjacket.

My own article 'Public Dissent and Governmental Neglect' appeared in the same issue of the journal. It sought to highlight the socio-political and socio-spatial landscape of day-to-day life at Macquarie Fields drawing on interviews conducted with residents prior to the 2005 'riots'. It did so employing an analysis of the dynamics of social exclusion drawn in part from Jock Young's work *The Exclusive Society* (1999). In the article I sought to highlight how this intense sense of social exclusion could be interpreted as a set of conditions contributing to – though not causing – the dissent. Indeed, I sought to de-centre the 'riot' and draw attention to issues which I suggested provided a backdrop to the dissent and to highlight a range of problems rendered invisible by the intense focus on the riotous behaviour. The articles could thus be read back-to-back and on the face of it presented quite different analyses of the same event.

Hybridising from the Theoretical Toolbox?

I sought to briefly respond to Owen's initial critique of my 'peripheral work' in 'The Blame Game' (Lee 2007). While critically engaging with the moral economy/indignation approach I also sought to critically engage with a moral panic framework.¹ I made two specific criticisms. One, that both the moral indignation/economy approach and the moral panic approach present a reductive and singular account of crowd behaviour by trying to rationalise this. And two, that to fully render the moral indignation of the crowd intelligible it should be placed in a broader socio-political and socio-spatial context. I'll quote my criticisms in full so as to highlight their misinterpretation in Owen (2007):

[B]oth approaches force us to rationalize the actions of the participants as both directed and uncontaminated by the limitations in which their dissent is conducted. The rational/irrational binary in accounts of events such as the Macquarie Fields dissent is inadequate in a number of ways. First, the logical conclusion from a critical perspective is that one is compelled simply to blame police action in contravening moral protocols *or* provoking deviant action to the neglect of any broader critique of government. The fact that the anger was directed at police should not limit our analysis only to this relationship. ... This is not to deny the fact that a perceived police breach of moral protocol sparked the "riots". Rather it is to suggest that without these broader contexts the breach in moral protocols is unintelligible; not only would the breach not have sparked the "riots", but the breach would not have occurred in the first place. Second, this leads to a romanticisation of the 'rioters' and runs the risk of reifying the dissent in a way that allows us to ignore the more pressing social issues evident on the estate. I'm thinking here in particular of issues of sexual and family violence that are a reality in the area (Lee 2007:60 emphasis added).

Owen responded to my criticisms in 'The Moral Dynamics of Riots in Contemporary Australia' (2007) but interprets them as follows. I will do his argument the justice of reproducing it in its entirety which also includes a significant quotation from my article:

Collective moral indignation has been labelled 'unintelligible' by Lee because it forces us to 'rationalize the actions of the participants as both directed and uncontaminated by the limitations in which their dissent is conducted' [This] is misleading and the language passé (Lee 2007:60). One would have thought we had moved on from the language of binaries (Owen 2007:115).

I completely disagree that critiques employing binary style deconstruction are exhausted or can be characterised as 'intellectual discretions' (Owen 2007). I'm not sure where that would leave some rich veins of contemporary feminist critique for example. However, that

¹ Which I note was not what Owen was employing in his article. Nor was the element of my critique focusing on moral panic targeted at Owen's work.

is not the point to be made here. Rather, I note that Owen collapses two distinct arguments into one in order to interpret my argument in a particular way. Clearly my argument about *intelligibility* referred to the need to place the breach of moral protocols (between residents and police) in a broader sociological context; that is, to ask the question of how did we get to a critical situation where a breach of protocols can take place? My point about unintelligibility was thus not associated with the critique of rationalising in the way Owen suggests.

Moreover, I was not confusing studies of *deviance* with studies of *moral indignation* but rather outlining limitations of both approaches, some of which I suggested were shared, some not. I would, however, still suggest that reading the dissent through the lens of moral indignation is somewhat reductive. By all means let us seek to interpret a 'collective sense of moral indignation' *from below*, but let's not do it to the detriment of an analysis of other (or varied) subject positions, silenced resistances, or indeed to put it bluntly those that joined the fray for the sense of excitement it presented. Let me be clear, I am not equating *deviance* with *dissent* (although it is surely, is it not, reasonable to suggest that the rioters were constructed as deviant?). Rather, I am arguing that to reduce this complex multi-dimensional incident to a two sided moral economic encounter is partial.

However, far from being overtly hostile to Dr Owen's position, I sought to situate, or reinterpret, his argument in relation to the broader socio-spatial and socio-political landscape. I certainly did not, as he claims (2007:115) suggest out of hand his approach was 'unintelligible'; only that without traversing the broader socio-political, socio-spatial and indeed historical contexts it is rendered so. My belief is that placing moral indignation argument at the centre of events is very useful in explaining some very specific dynamics of the riotous behaviour – Jock Young in fact does this in the passage at the opening of this article. Indeed, I agree with Owen that in pinpointing a catalyst it provides some vital insight. But I cannot see why we would want to throw the baby out with the bathwater and *only* focus on this dynamic? Before proceeding let me provide the specific context in which I was writing (Lee 2007).

My chapter 'The Blame Game' (2007) set itself a very specific task. It appeared in a book titled *Outrageous: Moral Panics in Australia* (Poynting & Morgan 2007). In the spirit of that collection I set about systematically applying, and then critiquing, a moral panic framework to the dissent at Macquarie Fields. As already indicated above, I see some very real problems in using this framework to explain the complexity of the Macquarie Fields 'riot'. I added to this critique of moral panic a (somewhat sympathetic I would have thought) critique of moral indignation as noted above. Did I suggest both frameworks lacked merit entirely? Of course not. Did I think both were partial? Yes. Moreover, do I think my own initial framework (Lee 2006) was partial? Yes. Indeed, my 2006 article never sought to *causally* explain the 'riots', although in 'The Blame Game' (Lee 2007) I did attempt to more specifically address the dynamics of the dissent.

Owen (2007) however presents my argument (2006) as problematic because of its partial or peripheral nature, in that it does not assess the 'mutual suspicion' between the police and young residents. Using somewhat colourful and metaphorical language he suggests I, like many before me, have 'stood before this great divide [of mutual suspicion] in recent years, and despite coming to terms with its presence, and acknowledging its place in our common logical geography, they have dared not cross its limits' (Owen 2007:109). And he proceeds:

Murray Lee has recorded, in his journey, the bleak scenery that so many others have noted when traversing this path. Taking a closer look at 'dissent' and 'rioting', Lee discovers in the woodlands, and across the valley plains, a certain uncomfortable truth about the

Australian context: that they are ‘triggered by issues’ of disadvantage, inequality, social isolation, poor governance and community breakdown’ (Lee 2006:34). Upon reaching the river Lee (2006:34) makes a startling observation. Portrayed with a keen eye for detail, mutual suspicion is depicted as thus, ‘... each episode has involved the exercise of police powers in a way was perceived to – and in some cases did – occasion death ... each has occurred in a context where the relations between community and police were already strained’ (Owen 2007:109).

Let me make something of an admission here. In an introductory sentence to a brief review section titled ‘Contextualizing riots in Australia’ I did use the term ‘triggered’ (Lee 2006). It was not in the context of the Macquarie Fields ‘riots’. However, my use of this is something Owen has made much of and deserves comment. The terminology was, I agree, unhelpful and indeed counter to my overall argument. Indeed, it is quite clear that the *causal* argument is not one I am making in either article (Lee 2006, 2007). That is, I am clearly not suggesting that there is a direct causal link between the ‘riot’ and ‘governmental neglect or social isolation’. I went on in the next paragraph to note the police involvement in catalysing events and community perceptions about the misuse of police powers as being vital ingredients (Lee 2006:34) as Owen has.

Moreover, while I might be rightly accused of surveying the scenery from the riverbank (at least in Lee 2006), I remain a little unclear as to what problem there is in this. My argument was based around empirical data including interviews with residents (recorded prior to the ‘riots’) and it was largely the landscape they articulated in these interviews (and observation and field notes), as well as a broader socio-spatial history of the area, that I attempted to map and present. No doubt there is something of a gap between this landscape and the show of dissent we saw in March 2005. Does this mean I throw away this cartography as if it speaks nothing to the dissent? I think not. While Owen has me standing on the riverbank (this great divide) searching for meaningful landmarks let me explore this somewhat forced metaphor further to interrogate his own position.

It seems to me that Owen plunges into the river of ‘mutual suspicion’ boots and all armed with the meta-structural floatation device provided by ‘forty years of scholarship into popular protest by social historians’ (Owen 2006:7). His floatation is tenuous though because without a map of the landscape (which he summarily discarded in 2006) he attempts to cross at the widest point. His moral indignation framework has to span this mighty ‘river of mutual suspicion’ with only the faith that although contexts might vary, we can read the ‘riot’ through ‘set[s] of conventions or customs [that] develop over time through contact with different sections of the community, including members holding positions of authority, such as police’ (Owen 2007:111). He swims on fearlessly ignoring the strong social undercurrents suggesting that moral indignation can bridge almost any river and be used to account for just about every instance of popular protest in Australian history (Owen 2007:113, 114) if we see participants as ‘sensitive to the dynamics of authority and dominance present in their respective contexts’. He accuses me (I think, although the argument as articulated is difficult to follow) on the other hand of arguing that history is unimportant; suggesting ‘one must first possess an historical cast of mind’ (Owen 2007:111).

Competing Histories

I did not ever suggest that history was unimportant. Indeed, my own work (Lee 2006) was hopefully attentive to a range of histories that I suggested helped create the current cartography of experiences at Macquarie Fields. My point about history was simply to acknowledge the trap of constructing unchanging subjects of history and reading these

subjectivities into an endless range of events – finding similarities and continuities everywhere despite differences in context. In the spirit of the chapter I was writing on moral panics I deployed Cohen (1980:ix) to make this point, but I'd be more comfortable with Foucault (1984:87, 88):

Nothing in man [sic] – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men. The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled. Necessarily, we must dismiss those tendencies that encourage the consoling play of recognitions. Knowledge, even under the banner of history, does not depend on “rediscovery”, and it emphatically excludes the “rediscovery of ourselves”. History becomes “effective” to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being – as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself.

I acknowledge Owen's point that his framework is based ‘around a normative position about human action and collective reasoning’ (2007:115). However, it is also this normative position which I believe history should seek to problematise. It is in this sense that I see limitations to this particular method. It was precisely this point which drew me to the work of Kevin McDonald (1999) around ‘the sociology of action’ as a framework for somewhat bridging the ‘gap’ towards the end of the ‘Blame Game’ (2007) article. His work reads youth identity, experience and action (not delinquency) by grappling with the question of how selfhood is established in an increasingly fragmented post-industrial milieu (1999:4). He aims to reintroduce the actor through exploring the creativity in fragile forms of struggle for recognition. In the tradition of appreciative sociology it provides social explanations for experiences. Moreover, it seeks to do this ‘from below’ (McDonald 1999:5). Through a lens such as this we can construct an appreciative account of events at Macquarie Fields through the range of subject positions involved. This of course does not somehow exclude or diminish any analysis of moral protocols between actors, community and police – indeed it provides a useful space and language for the analysis of this. But importantly, neither does it exclude an analysis of broader social experience and explanations.

I find it somewhat irreconcilable that while Owen (2007) is only too willing to reject the kind of historical and socio-political backdrop I attempted to map out in regard to Macquarie Fields, which specifically included a discussion of ‘strained’ police community relationships and ‘schizophrenic policing practices’ (Lee 2006), he is willing to accept the ‘notable continuities ... including deaths in custody [and the] ... suspicion of bias in the criminal justice system’ in his reading of the Palm Island riot (Owen 2007:111). I am not defending police actions (or inactions) but why this somewhat exclusive focus on police community relations to the exclusion of almost all other relations? Perhaps my analysis does lack a reading of the moral indignation expressed by the crowd. However, in response I would suggest that the fact that there was moral indignation on the part of many (if not most) of the dissenters at Macquarie Fields was pretty bleeding obvious and does not require the sociological imagination of the criminologist or sociologist, or the ‘historical cast of mind’ of the historian to decode. Yes, there are important questions to ask of police actions and behaviours but the task should also be more expansive.

An Array of Conclusions

I remain very sympathetic to Owen's approach to the moral economy of the Macquarie Fields ‘riot’ and believe it offers one of many useful lenses through which to view the dissent. Obviously Dr Owen has significant misgivings about my own approach(es) as is his prerogative. It was with some ambivalence that this article was written, as I'm not sure

this academic debate deserves more oxygen. Hopefully, however, debate and (perhaps) synthesis can shed more light on the topic. In the spirit of my initial intervention into this topic (Lee 2005) I believe that the community of Macquarie Fields deserves more than a quarrel between academics. I stand by my initial argument that poor planning, poor or poorly implemented policy, and poor government has fuelled discontent at ‘estates like Macquarie Fields’ and that these problems are also ‘rooted in governmental and market ambivalence and neo-liberal rationalities more than they are in localized dysfunctional processes of socialization’ (Lee 2006:46). I have never made the argument that these underlying issues were *causally* related to the ‘riot’, nor that the ‘riot’ was specifically related to class, although in places Owen seems to infer I did – he is however more strident on this point in his criticisms of others (specifically Cook 2006 and Burchell 2007 cited in Owen 2007). I also note that Owen clearly suggests that class is important here – how can he not in terms of the body of work from which he draws? However, he unusually enough draws on the age-old conservative line to argue:

[I]f housing or socio-spatial based disadvantage rests at the heart of the riots, what is to differentiate Macquarie Fields from other suburbs similarly affected by youth unemployment, poor transport networks, etc? Are we to see a replay in Claymore, Salisbury, Coledale, Inala, Airds, Mt Druitt, Richmond and the like?

Of course one could counter and suggest that if moral indignation is the only way to read the riot can we expect riots at Mosman, Coogee and Toorak if moral protocols are broken and moral indignation takes hold? Both arguments, in Owen’s own words, ‘make silly claims’ (2007:108). The point is that, at least in the foreseeable future it is unlikely that mutual suspicion will take hold in the second set of suburbs; the underlying conditions are not favourable to this. Indeed, my answers to the questions Owen poses above would be *nothing much, and probably not*. Many of the areas named do suffer from exactly the same underlying issues as Macquarie Fields yet the history of this type of dissent in Australia tells us that we are unlikely to see a direct replay – although, a direct replay is never completely out of the question either. It is however worth highlighting the importance of the specificity of locality and context in understanding these forms of dissent and the danger of reading similarities into all forms of dissent. It is also worth adding that the need to focus on empirical details concerning locality should be coupled with a focus on the specificity of events leading both up to and on from the dissent.

Finally, whether causally linked to the dissent or not I would suggest that highlighting the contours and patterns of social isolation and discontent in some of our communities is no bad thing. Surely it is part of any critical social scientific project. Back in 2005 my immediate concern with the way that the Macquarie Fields dissent was being portrayed in the public arena was that it once again directed our attention away from the very real social problems of intra- and inter-familial violence in communities like Macquarie Fields. Of course even in regard to these issues relationships between police and community, and the moral economy of such relationships are important. But equally or more important are the governmental and policy contexts that have created a set of conditions under which such cycles of community violence can develop, and thus also allowed ‘mutual suspicion’ to fester in the first place. This is not to somehow simply equate narratives of disadvantage with ‘unbridled criminality’, nor to equate criminality with the dissent.

In the end we often ask different sorts of questions. In doing so we get a different set of answers that direct us to a variety of alternative (and sometimes hopefully complementary) policy propositions and possibilities. Police/community relations and their moral dynamics in regards to the Macquarie Fields ‘riot’ deserve attention. So do a range of related socio-political and socio-spatial issues many of which also influence police/community relations.

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