

Why Can't We Leave our Racism at the Door?

There is a connection between 77% support for John Howard's treatment of the Tampa refugees and the failure of the World Conference Against Racism. The connection is a phenomenon called mimesis. It offers a different kind of logic to help us understand our society.

Many of the commentators railing against Australia's treatment of asylum seekers have struggled to articulate the logic behind the widespread support of our present policies.

On the one hand, Australia is one of the most generous countries in the world for refugee resettlement. Among the top three or four countries, along with USA, Canada, and Norway, who gladly accept genuine refugees.

On the other hand, Australia is one of the least generous countries in the world for those seeking asylum, with long queues and detention for queue-avoiders. Not even among the top thirty countries who permit asylum seekers to live in the community while waiting for their status to be determined.

On the one hand we have an economic rationalist government that champions efficiency and short-term economic efficacy in the use of money.

On the other hand, the same government spends millions of dollars to keep asylum seekers out of the country, in the queues, or in gaol. From a strict economic logic point of view, it would be cheaper to give each new arrival, legal or otherwise, a grant of \$250,000 and tell them to go out and multiply.

Doubtless, these last four propositions, among many logics that could be articulated, could be debated. My point here is that such a debate is meaningless. Interesting perhaps, but only to the extent that it diverts our attention from what is really going on in society. Only so long as we continue to believe the myth of human rationality. Humans are not rational beings. We just like to think we are.

And so to the World Conference Against Racism which has "been stymied by the sad fact that many of the delegates did not leave their racism at the door." Instead of being a conference *against* racism, it has become a forum for accusing alleged racists. Often in the most racist manner possible, ironically.

Both the general response to the Tampa refugees, and the degeneration of the World Conference Against Racism show the process of mimesis at work.

You see, human beings are primarily imitative creatures. We like to think of ourselves as logical animals, but this is a fairly recent illusion – the product of scientific rationalism of the last few centuries.

Of course, we do have powerful logical capabilities. But, for the most part, humans do not operate from a logical base. Why else would we smoke? Why else would we all wear denim? Why else would we gravitate to suburbs? Why else would "popular" ideas matter?

Most human learning comes from our powerful ability to imitate one another. That is how we learn language as children. That is how we learn to operate in relationship—by observing and copying our parents. Just watch how much children imitate their parents. Even to body language.

In the end, most of what constitutes human organised society relies on our enormous ability to imitate one another. Logic takes too long and must be reserved for the most important decisions of life. For the rest, imitation (or *mimesis*, to give it its technical name), must suffice.

For most ordinary Australians, the 77%, the Tampa situation is just too remote to deserve the attention of logic. Given the choice of following the Prime Minister's lead, most people will naturally exercise the imitative option.

And, here is an important point, since our Prime Minister is a marvellously skilful populist politician, he begins by imitating majority public opinion without regard for the logic or justice that shapes that public opinion. He is not cavalier in this approach. Ironically, it has a powerful and defensible logic—the logic of the herd. The logic of *mimesis* is that what most people want they should get (regardless of any other logic).

It is, of course, the logic behind the famous *lex talionis* – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

And it is that mimetic logic that is playing out at the World Conference Against Racism. The logic of *mimesis* is that racism can be fought with racism. Of course, it is a self-defeating logic but those caught up in the mimetic spiral are unable to see the danger in the whirlpool that sweeps them down. The myth of justice allows the accusers to obscure their own racism. So those accusing Zionism of racism have no sense that they might be racist in doing so.

John Howard's populist logic serves his goal which is to get re-elected. Our democracy, for better or worse, relies on popularity. It's churlish to complain that our PM is a populist. He wears it as a badge of honour.

But for the organisers of the World Conference Against Racism a different strategy is required. And it requires less *mimesis* and more logic.

Focussing on the problem is the way of *mimesis*. Focussing on the solution is the way of logic.

The former, focussing on the problem, is easier. It comes more naturally to imitative humans. But it tends to create eye-for-an-eye remedies. You do something bad to us: we'll do something bad to you. You act like a racist, and I'll accuse your race of being racist. You enter our waters illegally, we'll tip the bucket over you.

The latter, focussing on the solution, is harder. It requires more time, information and energy. But it tends to create society-changing solutions. You do something bad to us: we'll try to find a way to forgive and be reconciled. You act like a racist, and we'll try to show you how genuine multiculturalism obliterates the myth of race. You enter our waters illegally, and we'll work together to recognise we are in the same boat.

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