From Covert to Overt: The Role of Crisis in Transforming Racism

Narayan Gopalkrishnan
James Cook University, Cairns, Australia.

Narayan Gopalkrishnan is an internationally recognized academic with extensive experience in Australia and overseas, working in universities, NGOs and the private sector over the last 30 years. He lectures at James Cook University in the areas of community work, working with diverse communities, and mental health. Narayan was formerly the Founding Director of the Centre for Multicultural and Community Development, an academic research center of the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia, which focused on research and development relating to multiculturalism and community development. Narayan's teaching and research interests relate to Community Development, Community and Ecological Sustainability, Cultural Diversity and Multiculturalism, Social Determinants of Health and Well Being, Integrated Medicine and Complementary Therapies, and he has published widely in these areas.

Over the last few decades community awareness and social pressure have ensured that overt racism and racist actions have become relatively less in number in many countries across the world. The majority of racism that impacts adversely on individuals and communities today, especially in countries like Australia, is far more subtle, every day and covert, making it very difficult to identify or to challenge. However, this can change dramatically in times of *crisis*.

Crisis in society can be caused by a number of social, political, environmental and economic factors including dramatic and immediate ones like 9/11, or longer term ones like the Global Financial Crisis. They all have significant effects in terms of intense distress within individuals and communities and adverse impacts on people's abilities to cope with life. They also bring out the best and the worst in human responses. On the one hand, environmental disasters like the Brisbane Floods of 2011 were followed by widespread scenes of community solidarity and mutual support. On the other hand, crisis situations like 9/11 were followed by a rapid transformation of covert racism into overt racism and expressed in actions that impacted very adversely on minority groups in society. This paper examines the nature and causes of this transformation and excavates some of its impacts on the community. It further looks at implications of this in terms of developing effective responses to racism in crisis situations.

Introduction

The aspect of racism that gets the most attention in society and the media is most often the direct and overt aspect of it, especially that which involves physical violence or open discrimination that can be easily identified. This overt aspect of racism was certainly very dominant in the past, as in the case of the official use of the White Australia Policy and in the treatment of Indigenous

Australians (Hollinsworth, 2006; Scott Poynting & Mason, 2007). In the last few decades, however, there has been a transformation based on social pressure, where overt racism and easily identifiable racist actions have become relatively few. Holdaway and O'Neill (2007) point to this in their research with the UK constabulary to argue that open expressions of racism have largely disappeared, to be replaced by covert forms of racism and hidden institutional forms of racism. They also discuss the ways in which private spaces within organisations, as well as the discretionary use of rules, can form avenues of the expression of covert racism.

The majority of racism that impacts adversely on individuals and communities today is far more subtle and covert, making it very difficult to identify (Coates, 2008). Even the language of racism has changed, with overt expressions of bias against particular groups replaced by selective ascribing of negative behaviours to the same groups and denigration based on this (H Babacan, 2008). Covert racism is also very difficult to challenge through formal channels due to its hidden nature and difficulty of identification. The everyday and hidden form of covert racism, when taken together with the fact that it is relatively safe for the perpetrator to commit acts of covert racism, leads to this form of racism being a major part of the racism experienced today (Holdaway & O'Neill, 2007). However, this balance between overt and covert racism can change dramatically in times of crisis as these can provide a moral setting for racism to be expressed openly and without fear of retribution covert racism can easily turn into overt racism.

Crisis

Crisis in society can happen in many ways and can be caused by a number of social, political, environmental and economic factors. These can include factors that impact in immediate and direct ways as with the 9/11 attacks in New York and with the 2011 Tsunami in Japan, or they may impact over an extended period of time as with the Global Financial Crisis or Climate Change. They all share in common their effects, as for example in the effects of natural disasters, in terms of intense distress within individuals and communities and adverse impacts on people's abilities to cope with life (Bassilios, Reifels, & Pirkis, 2012).

The idea of crisis goes back to classical Greece in which the term was used in the sense of reaching a crucial point that would tip the scales and, as noted by Koselleck and Richter (2006, p. 361), the concept of crisis was applied to 'life-deciding alternatives meant to answer questions about what is just or unjust, what contributes to salvation or damnation, what furthers health or brings death. It could express long-term changes as well as occasional outbursts, apocalyptic expectations as well as sceptical fears'. Chun (2011) contends that crisis is a condensation of time that demands a decision and is intertwined often with political events and catastrophe which are linked with immediate subject-less events about death and the failure of technology. Moreover, Kosseleck and Richter (2006) argue that, based on the frequency of the use of crisis as indicating actuality, the modern period can be considered the age of crises. As they argue, crisis is no longer a certain event but is malleable, not posing unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives but has been transformed to fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favoured at a given moment.

Beck (2009) discusses contemporary societies as risk societies. However risks cannot be reduced to objective facts and/or probabilities but rather are politically, socially and historically determined (Haines, Sutton, & Platania-Phung, 2008). The functioning of nation states in the globalised 21st century brings with it a challenges for democracy and an increasingly non-committed disillusioned constituency where neo-liberal ideologies and transnational capital has free reign without adherence to human rights frameworks (Wallerstein, 2005). At the centre of attention today are "manufactured uncertainties" which:

> … are distinguished by the fact that they are dependent on human decisions, created by society itself, immanent to society and thus externalizable, collectively imposed and thus individually unavoidable; their perceptions break with the past, break with experienced risks and institutionalized routines; they are incalculable, uncontrollable and in the final analysis no longer (privately) insurable (climate change, for example). Threat, risk and manufactured uncertainty are put in relation to the past by narrative means (sagas, historical events, biographies, etc.), perspectivized through stories (myths); threats are "humanized," "played out," made "conceivable" and thereby socially meaningful (Beck, 2009:293).

Crisis has a disempowering and crippling effect on individuals, families and communities (Bassilios, Reifels, & Pirkis, 2012). It can lead to the feeling of a need for a stable supportive power to enable survival. As Chun (2011) maintains, crisis does not lead to the experience of responsibility, rather it induces moments of fear and terror, as the term 'panic button' illustrates, from which we want to be rescued by others, whether it be by governments, corporations or technology. This normalises states of exception as more common and these call for extraordinary measures for moments of undecideability. It creates a sense of 'urgency' with security being presented as being 'essential' for 'self-defence' (Humphrey, 2013). Chun (2011) further argues that crises are not accidental to a culture focused on safety, they are its raison d'être. She claims that exceptional crises justify states of exception that undo the traditional democratic separation of executive and legislative branches. Citizens are willing to endure more intervention as result of anxieties created by crisis, so much so that they are willing to trade-off civil liberties and more coercive measures in return for security and safety (McCulloch, 2006).

Crises are times when the good and the bad sides of human nature can emerge. As an example, an environmental disaster like the Brisbane Floods of 2011 was followed by widespread scenes of community solidarity and mutual support. These were portrayed by the media as heroic efforts of rescue and warm feelings of community (Moore, 2011). On the other hand, crisis in society is a time when people are intensely stressed and fearful and easily swayed into the idea of finding a suitable scapegoat to blame for their distress. It is a time when the dark side of human society can emerge in the form of overt and often violent incidents of racism. For example, crisis situations like 9/11 were followed by a rapid transformation of covert racism into overt racism and expressed in actions that impacted very adversely on minority groups in society. The sudden increase in the anti-Islamic hate crime incidents in the United States of America following 9/11 is presented in the following table as an example of this form of response to crisis.
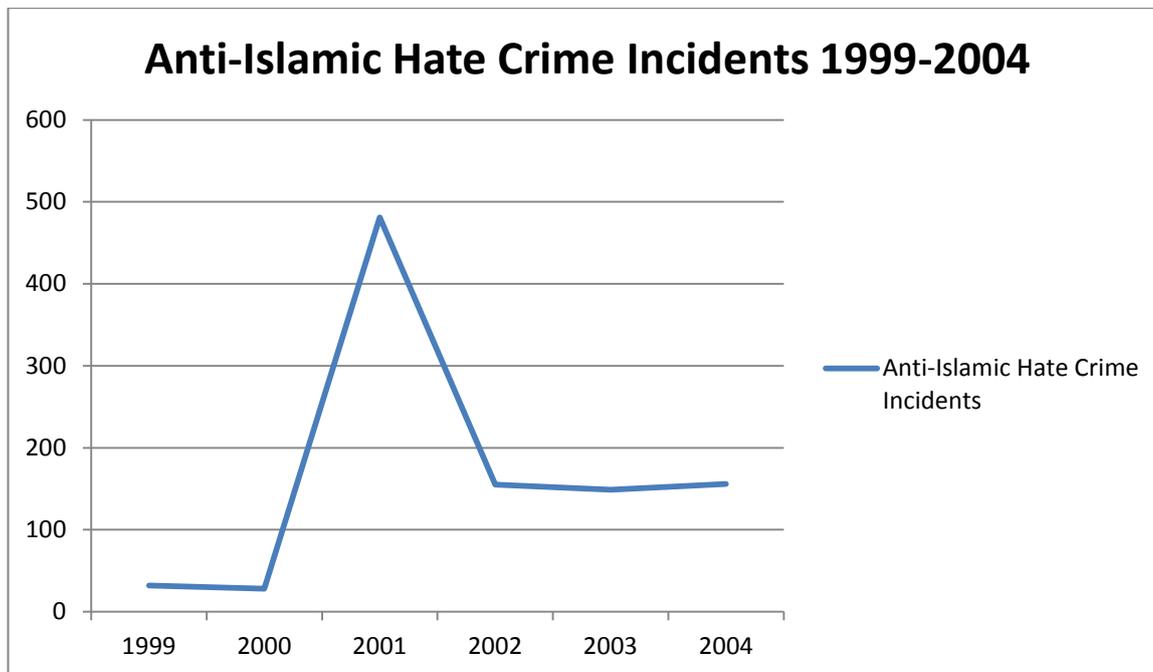
Anti-Islamic Hate Crime Incidents 1999-2004

As is clearly visible, the sharp spike in the level of hate crimes in 2001 is followed by a reduction that however stabilized at a level far higher than that prior to 2001. Further, it is very likely that the overall figures of hate crimes across many countries are far more as there is manifest and huge underreporting of such occurrences to official authorities (Scott Poynting & Mason, 2007). An Australian report based on a study conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission on the discriminatory practices towards Arab and Muslim Australians has also highlighted that hostile acts of verbal abuse and physical violence towards Arabs and Muslims dramatically increased after 9/11 (HREOC, 2004). In a survey of Australians of Arab and Muslim background in 2003 for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, Poynting and Noble (2004) found that two thirds of their respondents had personally experienced an increase in 'racism, abuse or violence' since 9/11: one third responded 'a bit more'; one third 'a lot more'. Only about one fifth of respondents reported no increase in personal experiences of racism, abuse or violence since around 2001. Some 93% of survey respondents believed there had been an increase in racism, abuse and violence directed against their ethnic or religious community; with 64% reporting 'a lot more' (S. Poynting & Noble, 2004). The literature clearly points to the major issues of fear and hatred that are centred around crises and impact particularly on minority groups in society.

Infeartainment, Racism and Hatred

Crisis is a time when the fear that people feel can be used by powerful individuals in society to further gather power to themselves by turning people against each other (Escobar, 2009). Leaders from the formal or informal political systems can use fear as a tool to strengthen their power bases and draw in-groups together. Robert Menzies, former Prime Minister of Australia spoke about this in 1942 as:

Fear has not only been a large and deadly element in international relations. It has also been a recognized and potent instrument of domestic policy. Indeed, a powerful case might be made out for the view that the emotion of fear is the most significant of all emotions on the field of politics (Menzies R. G. cited in Lawrence, 2006, p. 18).

While fear is a powerful force in itself, it has become an even more significant force in the last few decades with the rapid spread of the reach of the media and its sophisticated ability to spread messages quickly and effectively through the use of technology (Doane, 1990). Fear in this context has become both a way of channelling people's stress and anxiety as well as a way of entertaining them in the process. I have developed the concept of *Infeartainment* as a term that brings together many of these elements of the use of fear.

Infeartainment represents the use of fear by the powerful to contain the population while also providing them with entertainment as a form of distraction. It involves a set of processes set within a narrative framework and ensures compliance while also identifying visible targets to focus fear on. Infeartainment relies on misdirection as a tool to be used on behalf of the powerful in society and provides the moral framework within which the use of political and social controls as well as violence can be justified. Infeartainment depends significantly on the power of the media to operate through, and uses carefully constructed language towards its ends (N Gopalkrishnan, 2007)

Infeartainment represents the use of fear, often in racist ways, by the powerful to consolidate their power bases while also providing them with entertainment as a form of distraction, something that is easily related to the use of the Roman Circuses during the decline of the Roman Empire. The narratives incorporated into Infeartainment help to create a moral climate in which overt acts of racism can take place with impunity, as exemplified by the experience of people of Islamic background post 9/11 (Gopalkrishnan 2007). Furedi (2011), in the context of what he calls competitive scaremongering, asserts that the success of these narratives has little to do with the actual intensity of the alleged threat and more to do with the ability of the scaremonger to resonate with contemporary cultural values, representing fear utilized as a cultural resource. He argues that there has been a massive increase in campaigns and crusades built on fear over the past quarter of a century.

Infeartainment can be used effectively to produce the emotion of hatred (Escobar, 2009). In contrast to the previously cited quote by Robert Menzies' focussing on fear as the most significant emotion, hatred according to Adolf Hitler is the only stable emotion binds together a multitude of human beings and turns them into an obedient collective (1926 speech cited in Kershaw, 1998, p. 287). Escobar outlines the mechanisms of fear turning into hatred:

Through the stories of the press, and the images of the television, the difficulties, contradictions, and conflicts of social and political life are subjected to a "virtual" process of simplification. They are recounted and interpreted in terms of a schema, a commonplace perception that turns them into a scapegoating mechanism. For readers and viewers, their

own problems, great or small, appear as the results of a conspiracy whose perpetrators belong in the pre-eminent categories of the guilty: migrants, Islamicists, "ethnic criminals," the destitute (Escobar, 2009, p. 305).

Lawrence (2006:2) argues that fear continues to fuel cycles of worry in Australia at a time when the country has never been safer, with increased life expectancy, reduced child mortality, lessened civil strife and moderate murder levels. Discourses of the nation and patriotism are used in the context of fear and racism, where notions of cultural diversity are seen as a threat to patriotism and the nation and racism is almost normalised (Al-Natour, 2010). Resort to fear politics has facilitated and promoted new racisms in Australia (H. Babacan, Gopalkrishnan, & Babacan, 2009). Racism is powerful in its capacity to generate fear of 'others', a phenomenon that is widely understood as being a powerful tool for governments and corporations by which to shape public discourse and behaviours (N Gopalkrishnan, 2005).The worst form of this has been seen in the past in the form of the rise of the Nazis on the basis of race hatred but elements of it can be identified in much of the language used by the powerful even today. As the anthropologist Desmond Morris expressed it, 'Nothing ties the in-group bonds than an out-group threat', a process that really becomes a problem for the out-group used as the common enemy (Morris, 1969, p. 33).

Whether a Sikh cabdriver in Cairns or a Muslim woman wearing a hijab in Sydney, this use of Infeartainment has significant impacts on minority communities in society that are visibly different, as they are often the easiest to be identified in the public spaces and also the ones who are often chosen as the scapegoats to blame. In multicultural Australia, the use of Infeartainment is a major threat to social cohesion and the stability of the country. It is particularly a source of threat in times of crisis, when individual and group stress can be turned towards the politics of hate, picking on the visibly different groups as a target (Gopalkrishnan 2007).

Infeartainment plays out also in the use of language about the target population. Steuter and Wills (2010) identify that the public can disregard the processes of the law based on war-like, fear driven, and inappropriate language. They argue that the language used often in this context comprises a set of metaphors which represent the enemy as animals, particularly noxious, verminous, or pestilential animals, or as diseases, especially spreading and metastatic diseases like cancers or viruses, all of which allows for the establishment of the state of 'exception'. They suggest that the dehumanization involved in this use of language has fuelled the kind of prisoner abuse documented at Abu Ghraib. In times of crises, standards for what is socially acceptable and not-acceptable become altered. Mulinari and Neergaard (2012) suggest that violent acts are carried out more frequently in times when there is an opportunity structure that symbolically acknowledges, legitimizes, and supports the world-view at the core of these actions. That is, normalization of societal discourses opens the door for, and legitimizes the ideas behind acts of violence.

There are numerous examples of racialized and hatred based use of fear in recent times. The rise in hate crimes in the United States is one example that has already been presented. In its study of bias against Arabs and Muslims in the Australian media since 9/11, the Anti-Discrimination Board of New

South Wales (ADB) found that over the previous 18 months, debates in the media about September 11, the international 'war on terror', the prospect of US-led attacks on Iraq, the Tampa dispute, Australia's policies regarding asylum seekers, and the ongoing debates about law and order in Sydney, had the cumulative effect of generating a 'moral panic' in Australia (ADBNSW 2003 cited in Poynting & Perry, 2007). The Federal elections in 2001 are a specific example of the use of Infeartainment towards political ends where asylum-seekers were a primary target of the language of fear in the media and in the words used by political leaders and this has been delineated at some length in a prior publication (Gopalkrishnan, 2006)

Hate-motivated vilification and violence can only flourish in an enabling environment that includes the use of Infeartainment and targeting of minority groups by powerful people in society. It becomes extremely urgent at such times for effective responses to be implemented that present a counter-narrative and defuse the potential for violence. Some of these responses are discussed in the next section.

Responses

Diverse stakeholder groups are responsible for developing effective responses to racism in crisis situations. Crisis can be viewed as an opportunity or a threat and some examples of the differing reactions in communities have been discussed earlier. Leadership at Community, State and National levels can play a key role in terms of determining this response. If they turn to Infeartainment the chances of violence in the community will be dramatically increased. Leaders have to avoid the use of Infeartainment at all costs even if there is the possibility of political gain. Further, determined and immediate responses have to be made if overt incidents of racism are detected during or after a crisis, responses that deal with the problem at many levels and engage with as many people as possible. If we do not respond appropriately in times of crisis, the fabric of multicultural Australia can be badly damaged. However, if we respond appropriately, these times of crisis are those that will bring the nation together and enable us to build a better society.

While a significant amount is expected of the nation-state, it is in paradoxical roles as manager of community relations on the one hand and perpetuator of the racialised policy on the other. National identity is based on selective memory and often accompanied by the use of fear to unify disparate communities and Bulmer and Solomos alert us that:

> These fears can result in the defense of a cultural identity slipping into nationalism or racism: the nationalist affirmation of one group over another …it is a matter of the relative power of different groups to define their own identities, and the ability to mobilise these definitions through the control of cultural institutions (Bulmer & Solomos, 1998, pp. 827-828).

In the post-9/11 era, there is a greater emphasis by nation states to achieve cohesiveness in the face of perceived threats to nationhood. Globally, there is strong new dynamics of securitization, coupled with the changing politics of national belonging. These are part of rhetoric of global governance measures, interconnected to fear, insecurity and control (Babacan & Babacan, 2008). However, using blame and fear as a political tool undermines the fabric of a cohesive society as well

as denies the key role that pluralism and social inclusiveness play in building collective belonging (Crowley & Hickman, 2008).

Moreover, Coppola (2009) alerts us that in times of crises the most important thing to manage is fear itself. He asserts that controlling public fear is a public safety responsibility but fear management must be supported by the Federal government to be effective and that capabilities in this regard must be developed. Coppola also touches on the role of the media and the drive for different information which may or may not be beneficial to manage crises. He argues that the media needs to be assisted to act responsibly and to ensure that during crisis public safety information reaches a wide audience. Similarly Newman (2007) identifies that the media sets the terms for the public debate and can provide the stories and material to justify prejudices, presenting them as accurate and independent. The author suggests that developing a well-informed and educational public relations message may assist in more positive media reporting. Steuter (2010) argues for a more emancipatory media framing as this can help formulate solutions to what seem like intractable conflicts rather than framing conflicts as inevitable because they emerge from fundamental and essential difference. A critical and self-aware media can also help reduce the dominance of rumour, misinformation, and propaganda and moderating conflict.

Poynting and Perry (2007) caution that the *failure* to engage in public discourse can also leave groups vulnerable during times of crisis. Silence, as well as speech, can effectively render victimised groups impotent; excluding them from protections afforded others. Both acts of commission and omission raise questions about the particular groups' legitimacy and place in society; in some cases, they explicitly define their 'outsider' status. Strong systems which enable active citizen participation in public debates and inclusion in democratic process for communities that are affected become critical in times of crises. Kenny (2011b) argues that the state is a site of struggle and a contested terrain. In this respect, the state is a site for social struggle and factors such as ethnicity, class and gender become important in securing legitimacy, resources and support. It is also a site for struggle to ensure appropriate responses in the face of social crises. This means that ensuring that the government representatives with whom the public frequently comes into contact at the time of crisis are well informed and trained to respond to fears and concerns constructively, including training in the use of appropriate language as this sets the frame for public discourse (Newman, 2007).

And finally, as Newman (2007) points out, small-scale local activity can aid considerably in challenging messages of fear, using trusted public professionals such as doctors or teachers. Newman argues that these trusted groups often come into contact with the public on an individual basis, and ensuring that they have accurate information about key issues such as immigration and asylum can play a strong role in influencing people and act as a positive communication strategy. Empowering approaches can build resilience of communities and individuals in the face of crises and community development approaches need to adopted in these situations (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006; Kenny, 2011a).

Conclusion

This paper examined the impacts of crisis on societies. Crisis results in fear which can be portrayed as a risk to society. If this fear is harnessed in racialised terms then it focus on hatred and result in targeting of particular groups in very overt ways. Under conditions of fear, covert expressions of racism can metamorphose into overt racism and can be expressed in acts of violence that can have devastating consequences for the broader society. Often respect for diversity is diminished and there is a change in what is acceptable behaviour and treatment.

While a range of strategies may be adopted to address particular events, there needs to be a specific focus on fear, particularly fear of difference. How well a society copes in times of crisis is strongly related to the strength of democracy and pluralism. Therefore, in the long term there needs to be an emphasis on the leadership, focus on the messages being disseminated in the media and also through the public faces of the public institutions, civil society agencies and other agencies to strongly uphold democratic traditions and respect for diversity and difference. History has demonstrated that each crisis can set society back and have detrimental impacts for everyone.

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