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A Viable Ethics: Journalists and the 'Ethnic Question'

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INTRODUCTION

BECAUSE SOCIAL ETHICS IS ALWAYS CONCERNED WITH THE WAY individuals relate to and interact with each other, the question of 'the other', the one we are interacting with, is always at the heart of all social ethical concerns. Indeed, if there is one question that encapsulates the essential concerns of all social ethical investigations, it is this one: when we human beings interact with each other, how should we regulate our conduct so as to sustain each other's viability as human beings? This means a recognition that other people are, like us, engaged in a struggle to make their lives as human beings worth living. To try and sustain the human viability of others is to help them in this struggle.

In this essay, I will reflect on the significance of this question for White journalists writing and talking about Third-World-looking Australians, or as they are more popularly referred to, 'ethnic' Australians.[1] I want to know, how could White journalists report or comment on 'ethnic' people in a way that sustains their human viability? I hope it will become clear that such ethical questions are not about 'being nice to people'. They are about treating people as human beings. 'Being nice' to some people does not mean you are treating them as human beings. You can be very nice to animals without necessarily humanising them and, likewise, you can be very nice to humans and animalise them.

Dealing with ethical questions entails hypothesising about the impact of a specific way of acting in the world. Yet, at the same time, ethical questions cannot be primarily about impact. A journalist can't control the effect of what they say or write about people. A journalist's capacity to act ethically is always

dependent on the situation they find themselves in. So what is the point of ethical considerations? Mainly they are to encourage journalists to be *disposed* to think and act ethically. For example, it's safe to say that most people consider it unethical for a journalist to make readers or viewers feel that their lives are not worth living: to encourage them on the road to social, if not physical, suicide. According to this definition, an ethical journalist is one who strives to be aware of the impact they are having on others – and to avoid having a negative impact on others. In theory, this approach should guarantee that the overall impact of their work will have an ethical rather than an unethical impact.

THE ETHICS OF INCLUSION: *KHIDNA B HEL'MAK!*

'Khidna b hel'mak!' is an everyday Lebanese exclamation that people use when someone accidentally bumps into them without noticing their presence or takes no notice of what they are saying in a meeting. It literally means: 'Hey! Include me in your dreams!' Dreams here mean something like the symbolic or conceptual space that people imagine themselves to be in as they are engaging in a specific action in the world. In a meeting, the conceptual space of the person addressing the meeting is often the space made up of all the people the speaker imagines to be his or her audience. When a person feels that the speaker is not taking their position into account, they might say 'khidna b hel'mak' as a way of asking that their views be considered. The expression is also useful if a person feels their interests are not being considered. So when someone suggests a course of action that might be detrimental to the interest of another, the latter can interject with 'khidna b hel'mak'. In this sense, the exclamation is nothing but the expression of one of the most discussed questions in the history of philosophy: the desire for recognition.

If, as we have argued above, social ethics deals with the question of 'how to sustain the human viability of the other', this act of sustenance cannot happen without 'the recognition of the humanity of the other' as its pre-condition. Such a recognition not only involves the recognition of the mere existence of the other, it fundamentally involves a recognition of their humanity. This is why, when the Lebanese exclaim: 'Khidna b hel'mak', they often add, 'Are you mistaking me for a chair?' or, 'Are you mistaking me for an electric pole?' meaning: have you missed the subtle fact that I should be a human being for you and not just an object?

In the introduction above, I specified that my object of reflection is the interaction between White journalists and Third-World-looking Australians that occurs when the former write or comment on the latter. But this definition contains an optimistic assumption that the journalist reporting about Third-World-looking Australians is actually interacting with them; that in the process of commenting on them the journalist *recognises* their existence. And yet, in Australia today, many Lebanese read the paper or watch television and feel like telling journalists: 'Hey! Khidna b hel'mak!'. I am sure many Indigenous people and many Asians also have their own way of saying the same thing.

As Teun van Dijk, a Dutch researcher on racism and the media, pointed out long ago, ever since migrants have become news in the Western world, they have become present in the form of 'they'. That is, journalists talk *about* them – not *to* them.[2] This has also been a longstanding problem in the reporting of colonised racial minorities. This difference between 'talking about' and 'talking to' constitutes the demarcation line between the ethical and the non-ethical reporting of 'others'; between the journalism of recognition and the journalism of non-recognition. But this division is only theoretical. In practice, it is hard for every journalist reporting about some 'other' to simply talk to them and ignore the rest of their audience. From a practical perspective, the ethical art of recognition is to know how to talk *to* another, even when you're talking *about* them. It means never losing perspective of the fact that 'they' are also listening, reading and viewing the media at the same time that they appear in it as objects of concern. In popular terms, it means recognising that 'they' are not from Mars – they are fellow human beings and fellow nationals.

It is important to stress that the recognition of others does not simply mean 'noticing' their existence. The whole point of recognition is the interactive nature of the 'noticing'. As such, it is an act of inclusion – this is why the ethics of recognition *is* the ethics of inclusion. From a journalistic point of view, talking about 'ethnics' constitutes an obvious recognition that 'ethnics' exist. But the problem with this equation is that noticing someone does not necessarily entail recognition. Noticing the 'ethnic' is not the same thing as recognising that they are not just an object of contemplation but a human subject of interaction; someone with whom we are bound in an inter-subjective relation.

This is why the German philosopher Hegel, who has provided us with one of the most thorough investigations of the logic of recognition, sees recognition as a dialectic of desire in which we recognise the other's basic humanity by recognising them as desiring human beings: they want something from me. Accordingly, a White journalist writing about Asians who does not begin by asking, 'What do Asians want from me?', cannot claim an ethical disposition towards them. The White journalist is excluding them from his or her imaginary sphere of humanity.

Every journalist imagines an audience in his or her head when they are writing or speaking. Clearly, this imagined audience will always have a sociological specificity. Depending on the personal history of the journalist, and on which paper, radio, or television station they work for, the image will have particular class, regional and ethnic characteristics. According to most critics, while the class, gender and regional basis of this imaginary audience changes from one journalist to another, and from one media workplace to another, it remains relatively unchanged with regards to ethnicity: The audience is invariably imagined as White.[3]

For example, in the case of the 'Muslim Lebanese rapes' controversy, from which I will be taking some examples later, White journalists rarely even begin to think about what the Australian Lebanese they are writing about think of what they have written, let alone ask the question: 'What do my Lebanese readers want?' They merely imagine themselves as having a conversation between White Australians about 'the Lebanese problem'. The analysis of racism in the media is often about the content of how journalists portray the 'other' they are talking about. Yet, approaching reporting in terms of recognition allows us to understand that the imaginary audience is the key to understanding the national and the racial nature of the spatial imaginary of the majority of White journalists. Who is more racist – the White journalist telling a Lebanese readership that they should get their act together because they have rapists in their midst, or the White journalist telling an imagined White audience that the Lebanese are really OK after all, while ignoring their status as readers or viewers?

When journalists use or think the phrase 'we Australians', what is the content of their imagined 'we'? Is it White mono-racial, mono-cultural, or is it multicultural? If it is multicultural, then the question still remains: how is multiculturalism imagined? As I have argued in *White Nation*, there are two main modes of imagining 'ourselves' multicultural. One is based on the verb 'to have': we *have* a multicultural society. The other is based on the verb to be: we

are a multicultural society. In the first, the verb 'to have' works to distance the national 'we' from 'multiculturalism' in the way 'I have an umbrella' works to distance me from the umbrella: I am not an umbrella. I just *have* one. It is useful and I like it, but please, even though I might have it with me every day, I don't want you to start thinking that I *am* an umbrella! On the other hand, multiculturalism structured around the verb 'to be' invites the person to think: we *are* multicultural. Cultural diversity is what we are, not what we have. That is, our 'we' is not an appreciator of difference; it is constituted in difference, made out of various cultures. This is different from the idea that 'we have cultural diversity', where the we can remain mono-cultural even if it has, and loves, 'cultural diversity'.

In Australia today, I have no problems asserting that the journalists who still operate with an imaginary mono-cultural 'we', or a multicultural 'we have', are simply unethical. For when they are excluding a very large number of Australians from their imaginary of the nation they are, more often than not, excluding them from their imaginary idea of what constitutes 'humanity'. Anthropologists have long shown that there is a relation between one's conception of 'humanity' and one's conception of 'community' – whether this community is perceived as a village, a tribe or a nation. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss points out that:

> [F]or huge portions of the human species, and during tens of millennia, the notion [of humanity] seems to have been totally lacking. Mankind stops at the frontiers of the tribe, of the linguistic group, and sometimes even of the village, to the extent that a great many of the peoples called primitive call themselves by a name which means 'men' … thus implying that the other tribes, groups and villages have no part in human virtues or even human nature.[4]

Though modernity has seen the prevalence of a general category of 'humanity', the colonial experience encouraged the European 'tribes' of colonial capitalism to construct themselves as the ideal type of what it means to be a 'human being'. What the history of the rise of European colonialism showed was how this 'being the best type of human being' became associated with being White European, while other 'Third-World-looking types' were at best perceived as a lesser kind of humanity. In fact, excluding people from

'humanity' or considering them as 'less human' than we are is the best definition of colonial racism there is.

In the encounter between White journalists and 'ethnic' Australians, it is the reproduction of this colonial form of racial exclusion that one sees. And this exclusionary colonial gaze is a fundamentally unethical gaze, whichever way one looks at it. The journalist seriously interested in developing an ethical disposition in their practice will have to engage in a long-term project of modifying their conception of their imaginary audience. This is no easy task for it involves reminding oneself every second of the day that 'they' are part of 'us', with human desires and wishes that need to be taken into account. Only when this culturally plural conception of their imaginary audience becomes instinctive will they have succeeded in setting themselves up on the road towards an ethical journalism when dealing with 'the ethnic question'.

But as I have argued above, the recognition of the humanity of the other is only the founding step towards such ethical journalistic practice. It involves not only the recognition, but the sustenance of the other's humanity. I will now move to explain what this 'sustaining of the other's human viability', mentioned in the introduction, actually entails for journalists.

ON IDENTIFICATION: SELF-REPRESENTING OUR HUMAN VIABILITY

When philosophers and social scientists speak of human viability they often perceive it as a struggle. This flows from a very basic idea: in this life, there is no guarantee that our life is worth living, that it has a meaning. We are constantly struggling to ensure it has. It follows that there is no such thing as a person with an intrinsically meaningful and satisfying life. There are people who are more or less successful in making their lives meaningful and satisfying. The viability of our lives is dependent on the extent to which we are involved in 'life projects' such that we can subconsciously say to ourselves 'my life is worth living'.

For the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, it is society that is the prime distributor of meaningful lives. Society, however, as Bourdieu is quick to point out, does not distribute meaningful lives equally. Some of us receive a very meaningful life to begin with and have to struggle to maintain it, and some of us receive so little that we literally go begging for a meaningful life.[5] But for all of us, those of us who have plenty and those of us who have little, the meaningfulness of our lives, and the satisfaction we derive from it, is

always precarious and dependent on the support and the recognition that others give us along the way.

There are many ways in which we can support and sustain the other's struggle for viability. Here I want to concentrate on the processes of identification that are part of this struggle, for they are of particular importance in the practice of journalism. I will examine the significance of self-identification in the way we construct our viable selves and its relationship to the way others identify us. It is around this question of the 'identification of the other' that I want to discuss the ethical disposition in the media's approaches to the ethnic question. This is a question often discussed from a different perspective under the label of 'ethnic labelling' and the question of 'negative stereotyping'.

The process of self-identification, the identities we adhere to or give ourselves, is the way we represent to ourselves and to others our relationship to our life pursuits. And the significance of each of our many identities to ourselves is often linked to the significance of the life pursuit they help us represent. It is in this sense that our mode of self-identification reflects the way we define our human viability to ourselves and to others.

But because our human viability is a struggle, it embodies the constant fear of failure and we experience it affectively, not just rationally. Human viability is a carrier of wild emotions, because it embodies the threat of what Bourdieu calls 'social death': the fear of having nothing to live for, when we feel that our life is no longer a viable life.

The French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, has shown that in every process of identification the statement 'I am this or that' is only, at best, a comforting illusion. We can say, in light of his work, that there is no such thing as 'being' this or that, there is only a 'trying to be'. When people declare themselves to have an identity, to *be* something, even when that identity is as general as being human, the statement 'I am human' simply hides an anxious struggle. It really means, 'I am struggling to be what I think a human should be'. Consequently, for Lacan, to be a human is only an ideal. The feeling of being a viable 'human' derives from how 'successfully' we feel we are trying to be human. That is, we are viable insofar as we feel we are successfully trying to be viable, or, to use Lacan's language, insofar as we can sustain a *fantasy* of viability. It is because of the fragility of this fantasy that the way others identify us generates so much affect – and can have such a dramatic effect on how we experience our own viability.

It follows that the common critiques of ethnic stereotyping based on the idea that 'they do not correctly reflect reality' miss the point. People's identities are all 'stereotypes', and none of them 'reflects' reality. Indeed, the first thing we can learn from the above is that identification has nothing to do with who people are; it reflects the fantasies they create about themselves.

To clarify this concept, let us briefly examine the two processes that constitute identification: the choosing of a category of identification and the choosing of its meaning. We can call these the process of category selection, and the process of articulation of meanings. Category selection describes the way we end up giving some of our identities more importance than others. As a person I can be Catholic, Lebanese, a woman and a social worker – and all of these identities are ways in which I relate to something that I am or do in the world. Not all of them are identities I have chosen. Some I have inherited. Some are imposed on me by others. Already, even at this point, the process of selection is a struggle: I struggle to be only what I want to be even though others might try to make me what they want me to be.

Clearly, for each person, some identities are more meaningful than others. Some are inherited as important. This is the case with national identities. But even if one inherits an 'important' identity, one can grow to experience it as less important. We can be born Catholics, and continue to see ourselves as Catholics without Catholicism being an identity that affects ourselves one way or another.

There will be other identities to which we relate more affectively. These are usually the identities which reflect who it is we would like to see ourselves as being. Usually such identities are trans-situational: they constitute our identity wherever we are. For instance, someone might feel themselves to be a social worker only at work, but Australian everywhere they go. Others can feel that their identity as a social worker is far more important than their identity as an Australian.

Increasingly today people have a 'hybrid identity'. They fuse two or several identities together, such as Tiger Woods describing himself as 'Cablinaisian', a fusion of his Caucasian, Black, Indian and Asian identities.[6] People who have hybrid identities are no more 'fragmented' than people with mono-identities. In fact, people often use hybrid identities to stop themselves from fragmenting. What is important to remember is that in all these pluralities of categories of identification people are struggling to select the one or many

identities which can come to signify to them and to others what they consider significant about themselves socially and affectively.

But this selection is not only a selection of a mere category. It is a choice of the meaning and significance associated with this category. This is what the process of articulation entails. These socially and historically specific meanings that become attached to a category of identification are what we refer to as the 'articulated meaning', after the concept of articulation developed by the English theorist Stuart Hall.[7] The more articulated meanings are attached to a category of identification, the more it is likely to be socially and affectively important in defining a person's fantasies of viability. It is because they are often the bearers of so many articulations that communal identities (ethnic or national) acquire such importance for so many individuals. But again, it is important to remember that articulation is a struggle. People identifying as Catholics in Northern Ireland might struggle to articulate the meaning 'freedom fighters' has to the Catholic identity, while others might like to articulate it to 'murderers'. Identification at all levels of selection and articulation is an endless struggle to put yourself in the best possible light in relation to others who might want to put you in a different light – or even in the worst possible light.

Usually, the more people feel unthreatened about their communal identity the more capable they are of articulating negative things to it: 'We Australians are impossible, etc ...' If people feel they are under siege, any attempt to associate negativity to an identity that matters to them becomes experienced as an attempt to disintegrate their viability. This is the case with Australians who reject any hint of an articulation such as 'Australians murdered Indigenous people in the past' and experience it as threatening to their whole well-being.

Consequently, the journalist who enters this field of identification unaware that it is basically an arena of struggle, and thinking that an identity is merely a 'description' is very naïve indeed. In the journalist's use of ethnic identification, they become a participant in people's struggles to construct viable fantasies of themselves. The journalist can do so in various ways: by trying to adhere to their own identification of themselves, for instance, or through imposing on others categories they do not wish to identify with – or even through articulating to their identities meanings they do not wish to articulate to them. The journalist does not always choose the way of intervention, but they should always try to be as aware as possible that they are. Nor is there a

'best way' to intervene. Sometimes people's fantasies of viability involve the puncturing of the fantasies of others and it might be necessary to challenge them. So it is not clear-cut what one should *do* about it. What is clear is that whatever one does, one should always be ethically predisposed and knowledgeable so as to maximise wherever possible the struggle of others to sustain their viable identities.

I think that more than ever, this fostering of an ethical disposition is of prime importance today for reporting about the very difficult Arab/Muslim/Lebanese arena of identification which is crisscrossed by issues like 'gang rapes', 'refugees', 'terrorism' and 'war on Iraq'. The complexity of the situation suggests that 'behaviourist guidelines' in the form of 'this is what a journalist should do' are profoundly unhelpful. Whatever journalists *do*, whether they are being critical or supportive, if they lack awareness that Lebanese/Arab/Muslim Australians are part of the 'national sphere of humanity', and they have an obligation to try whatever possible to maximise their viability, then they will be failing ethically, and gratuitously, harming other human beings. Most probably, they will also be harming the well-being of Australian society.

Journalists might not think much of writing 'the murderer, a man of Lebanese descent ...', but today they cannot avoid thinking about the impact this actually has, and how useful it is to Lebanese Australians reading it. They have to think about the inter-subjective dramas their mode of interaction with the 'ethnic question' can lead to. The journalist using this combination is not necessarily stereotyping or being empirically incorrect. But they need to train themselves to be aware that there is a large number of Lebanese/Muslim/Arab Australians who feel understandably fragile about their struggle for a viable life. This is especially so for people who have no compensatory class or educational power to immunise them against the unprecedented barrage of negative media coverage. These days, there is an article every second day which contains phrases like 'the rapist, a Muslim Lebanese ...' or 'the defendant, a man of Lebanese background ...' or 'Following the murder, the man escaped to Lebanon'. In facing the negative stereotyping of their own identities, people who feel targeted in this way begin to develop their own stereotype of the 'Australian' reader – a stereotype that suits their fragile state. Suddenly, they imagine thousands, if not millions, of gullible readers or viewers thinking for the nth time and thanks to yet another article or news

item:'Lebanese ... killer'. They see the White Australian gaze falling on them, penetrating them and even disintegrating them. Or they might mentally displace themselves into the body of a Muslim woman if they are not one: She is vulnerable, she is being attacked! Or into the body of a Lebanese youth if they are not one. He is now being attacked. Everyone is pointing the finger: 'Lebanese killer'. What gain do we have in making other fellow nationals feel this way unless we are really treating them not as fellow nationals/humans but as sub-humans/enemies?

I have before me an article by Paul Sheehan.[8] It argues that:'It cannot be a coincidence that the least cost-effective immigration/refugee stream in the past fifteen years, in terms of high unemployment, high welfare dependence and high crime, has come from the Middle East, particularly Lebanon'. And it immediately goes on to say:

> A 1998 article, 'Sydney's Ethnic Underclass', by demographers Bob Birrell and Byung-Soo Seol, measured the incomes of men aged 25 to 44 and found that a very high percentage of those born in Lebanon, 40.7 per cent, earned less than $15,000 a year. This was compared with 14.7 per cent among Australian-born males. 'The community that stood out as the poorest and most welfare-dependent was the Lebanese,' says Dr Birrell.

What interests me in this piece is not the correctness of the statistics that are being used – though they could be disputed – but the total lack of sympathy that oozes out of the article. Sheehan is talking about his fellow human beings and his fellow nationals here. They might be adopted nationals, and he might not have had a say in their adoption, but they are his national 'brothers and sisters', even if he thinks they are 'physically handicapped' as a community. Yet what is Sheehan's attitude to them? Sheehan epitomises the journalist as rightwing worrier,[9] in which the attempt to obliterate 'the other' is justified because the other is not perceived as 'us' at all; even when this other is Australian for all practical purposes. Such journalism does not like itself to be labelled as 'racist' and maybe it is not. But, in taking human beings that are part of the nation and treating them as enemies whose presence is a nuisance, it seems to me to be unethical.

As I have argued above, it is not the question of being critical or uncritical that separates the ethical from the unethical. It is the distinction between

'being critical with' rather than 'being critical against'. We can criticise to elevate, and we can criticise to obliterate. We can criticise 'in the family', so to speak, and we can criticise by creating barricades.

An article by Rosemary Neil questioning the uncritical support that scarfed Muslim women were given on Headscarf Day is a good example of an inclusive critique.[10] Here, although there is a questioning of the cultural signification of the Muslim headscarf in terms of inter-Muslim gender domination, the critique is not animated by a divisive spirit. Regardless of whether one agrees with Neil or not, it's clear she believes that Muslims belong in the same human and national boat. And it is precisely this attitude -- that 'we' and Muslim Australians are in the same boat despite the storms brought about by terrorism, rape and war – that an ethical disposition towards sustaining the viability of the other ought to foster. I don't think I am exaggerating if I say that without this ethical disposition, and not just by journalists, and given the anti-Arab/Islamic storms that loom ahead, Australia, as the *still* relatively relaxed and comfortable kind of place we know, will be lost to us all.

NOTES

1. There are a number of reasons why I am specifying that the object of my reflection is the relation between White journalists and Third-World-looking Australians. First, in dealing with issues of 'journalism and racism' or 'journalism and ethnicity' it is important to specify exactly what kind of journalists and what kind of readership, audience or viewers we are talking about. The critiques and studies which place 'journalists' on one side and 'audience' on the other without any further clarification fail to see the complexities that each specific combination brings with it. This is the case, for example, with the commonsense critiques of 'media representation' and of 'ethnic stereotyping'. While it might be made explicit or implicit that the journalists being talked about are White journalists, the audience/readership is somehow nondescript and homogenised. Furthermore, it is important to note that I am using the concept of White not as skin colour but as the descriptive of a relation to the dominant culture in Australia. This is because there are many people who are not White in terms of skin colour but who are White in terms of identification. For a development of this point see Ghassan Hage, *White Nation* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998).
2. Teun van Dijk, *Racism and the Press* (London: Routledge, 1991).
3. This is largely implied, for example, in Andrew Jakubowicz et. al., *Racism, Ethnicity and the Media* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994).
4. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, Vol. 2 (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 329.

5   Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2000), 76–7.
6   John Gabriel, *Whitewash: Racialised politics and the media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 2.
7   Stuart Hall, 'Religious ideologies and social movements in Jamaica' in R. Bobock and K. Thompson (eds), *Religion and Ideology* (Manchester University Press, 1985).
8   *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 September 2001.
9   A similar animosity towards fellow Australians can be seen in the writings of even more straightforwardly self-declared rightwing worriers like Miranda Devine and Janet Albrechtsen.
10 *Australian*, 14 November 2002.