



# Lifeboat politics in the Pacific: Affect and the ripples and shimmers of a migrant saturated future



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## ABSTRACT

Affect is explored in relation to the governance of irregular migrants and asylum seekers that turn such vulnerable individuals into a feared category. How are emotions as *practices* developed, fostered and enacted? The examples developed in the article focus on 'illegal maritime arrivals' (asylum seekers arriving by boat) and the emotionally charged response to them in Australia. The article argues that the state, far from embodying a detached and neutral arbiter utilising various steering mechanisms of care and due process, instead governs through fear and anxiety generated in relation to outsiders. The state draws on, and indeed creates, dispositions and feelings, generating a distinct politics of affect. The motif of the lifeboat is an example of a diversion from the anxieties and fears in everyday life; a metaphor for scarcity and a battle for survival. The asylum seeker as 'illegal maritime arrival' (boat person) is the exemplar of such a lifeboat politics in the Australian case.

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*"If you can get here, you can stay here, there is almost no end to the number of people we could expect to land up on our shores ... The mark of a sovereign nation is keeping control of who enters the country. If a country cannot control who enters a country, it is in a sense exposed to a form of peaceful invasion. 30,000 illegal arrivals by boat doesn't seem perhaps as shattering as a peaceful invasion, but if 1000 can come, 2000 can come. If 2000 can come, 5000 can come"* Opposition Leader, Tony Abbot speaking about the arrival of asylum seekers (Australian Financial Review, 22nd November 2012).

This article examines affect as a politics associated with the state as sets of reverberations, shimmers and ripples generated through multiple acts, signals and rolling waves of feelings, attenuations and dispositions. The article is interested in the imbrication of the state, in layered, overlapping forms of 'habitually rhythmic undertakings' (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010: 12) manifest as affect through its political 'body'. Is the state as representative 'body' after all an expression of a type of pathology, a series of defensive acts against a threatening future? Does the state reflect the 'will of the people', while simultaneously crafting a limitation of possibilities or even an erasure? In this article, the future threat takes the form

of irregular migrants, specifically asylum seekers who arrive spontaneously at the borders of a state.

The case study explored relates to action and reaction to the arrival and presence of asylum seekers who arrive on small boats on the north-west Australian coastline. Certain dilemmas in relation to irregular migrant arrivals have practical import, such as the numbers of arrivals, their mode of entry and the claims such migrants have to remain, but overall the dilemmas that surface in relation to the arrival of irregular migrants are moral. That is, irregular migrants and asylum seekers unsettle the organised, regular fabric of governance as order and predictability with a consequent moral outrage about the process of 'unsettling' rather than the veracity of the legal claim – to asylum and substantive protection under the Refugee Convention. The article will posit that the state draws on and indeed builds an emotional register enacted about irregular arrivals through moral codes that trace lines through layers of social fabric like a tailor's tacking thread, holding that which is real (the suit fabric/the person asking for asylum) to that which is tentative or imagined (the suit pattern tissue paper/imagined threats and contagions and strategies to 'disappear' the unwanted). The article draws on some examples of both intimacies and anxieties that circulate in reverberations around and toward migrants who find themselves on the wrong side of the migration continuum that stretches across a large set of calibrations of official migrant categories: from legal to unauthorised; wanted to rejected;

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welcomed to feared. Although the case explored in this article of asylum seeker boat arrivals relates to the Australian context, migrant as threat and contagion can be extrapolated to numerous settings in the contemporary world, and particularly so in contexts of irregular migrants and asylum seeker arrivals.

The narrative of lifeboat and the attendant anxieties of survival and scarcity is a recurring motif in contemporary life that turns attention not so much to the vulnerable migrant but rather the resident who imagines stasis and everyday security as an entitlement and is unsettled by the risks implied by the lifeboat. In the lifeboat narrative worthiness and scarcity organise who is to be saved and who is to be sacrificed. The lifeboat is a moral dilemma not so much for those facing immediate dangers or threats, but rather for those at a distance, not in need of a lifeboat. It is those who are currently secure who are enticed to kick away the ladder into a metaphorical lifeboat for those in more immediate danger. The argument developed through the article relates to the key role of the state not merely as the official arbiter and decision maker on matters of border control and migration management, but as a pivotal agent in generating an emotionally charged politics of invasion and contagion.

The article is divided into three parts. First, the article considers emotion and affect through conceptual literature and situates the discussion in the context of the state and its institutional architecture. Second, the experiences of intimacy and care are explored in relation to migrants in order to consider whether the experiences of migrants are an intensification of experiences common also to residents and citizens. Third, the article turns to explore the Australian case of irregular migrant arrivals, drawing on the concepts outlined. The case study focus is on asylum seekers arriving by boat and the ensuing politics of affect.

## 1. The state and the vibrations, ripples and shimmers of affect

While emotion as a central aspect of the private sphere and the relationships of intimacy has a firm trace in social theory, a more thorough and consistent theorising of ‘a sociology of emotions’ emerged from the late 1980s (Barbalet, 2002).<sup>1</sup> From a classical view, emotions are a counterpoint to reason and rationality. The mind/body split for example, remains in some approaches a dominating logic (Svasek and Skribis, 2007). Indeed, the recurrence of this view is also reproduced in the visibilities of governance through the modern state (Handelman, 2007). Yet the notion that emotions are expressed through and situated primarily within the individual is widely contested. Emotions occur in social contexts, reverberating in and through objects, images and exchanges, given contextual meaning through cultural forms and as discourse. Feminist and new materialist accounts posit nuanced epistemologies of the relation between emotion, bodily sensation and cognition (Ahmed, 2004; Braidotti, 2006).

Critical to these debates and hence to the argument developed in the article, is the intentionality of emotions; that they are ‘about’ something. An emotion may be *about* a bodily experience – pleasure or pain resulting from a tangible interaction. Emotions may also be *about* a thought, a memory, a feeling in response to an image, a text, and a symbol. Rather than purely individualised experiences that rely on psychological methods for understanding, emotions are also conceived as having a social origin and expression as forms of cultural practice (Ahmed, 2004: 9, Misztal, 2005,

see also the introduction to this special issue). In this way we can glean that a thicker account and diagnosis of contemporary life – and its ‘politics’ – ought to include accounts of public emotions, including the actions of the emotional state (Joffe, 2007) and the affective reverberations that follow.

An important distinction between affect and emotion is one where a purely cognitivist account of human feelings is insufficient to account for that which is impulsive, indeterminate and unformed. “Affect is less anchored in discourse, it is more labile and fluid, and thus more susceptible to spreading rapidly through groups, even beyond face-to-face groups” (Hoggett and Thomson, 2012: 3). This type of fluidity was understood by Freud as ‘contagion’, whereas today such movement is likely to be interpreted as the presence of affective networks. The affective dimension encompasses the unpredictable, the unruly, an observation picked up later in the article in the context of the state utilising, or indeed also embodying a politics of affect.

Patricia Clough in her analysis of the ‘affective turn’ and the biomediated body, synthesises perspectives on ‘body-as-organism’, relating them to boundary making or boundary conditions. In the context of matter and information (drawing on Parisi) the relationship between information, energy, entropy and “life itself” is explored:

... movement in the theorization of information suggests that in a closed mechanical system, as the second law of thermodynamics states, the increase in entropy is inevitable as an irreversible process of heat-death. Meanwhile in terms of open systems, irreversibility or the passing of time is disconnected from heat-death or the entropic closed system, and it is understood instead in terms that extend and revise Claude Shannon’s take on entropy as the condition of possibility of information... information is the measure of the (im)probability of a message going through a channel from sender to receiver. Information, in this mathematical account, makes meaning secondary to information; information is primarily a matter of contact and connectibility, a modulation of attention or affect by fashioning or reducing the real through the exclusion of possibilities (2010; 217).

As a proto-typical organism or system, the state as representative ‘body’ reaches out for points of connectivity with its constituents – residents and citizens. In similar manner to the thermodynamic systems described by Clough, information is the conduit for contact. It is then possible to hypothesise that meaning is secondary to contact with affective reverberations resulting from multiple points of contact. To follow this logic, the primary work of information is to generate such reverberations, ripples and shimmers – in short, affect. Emotions are also evident in the actions and reactions of the state in the form of ritualised behaviour – standardised, or routinised ways of performing administrative tasks that become inscribed with an institutional logic over time. Institutional rituals (or performances of control) are enacted as if dispassionate and rational. The realm of affect is submerged, seemingly absent in the Weberian architecture of bureaucratic order and control, legitimized through legal authority. The immigration official, working in a high-rise tower in an urban centre, assesses the protection claims of asylum seekers that cross her desk. She is guided by national legislation, international legal norms, but above all by the three localised, contextual features; first, the specific workplace goals and rules for performance and efficiency; second, the workplace culture, non-codified, yet embedded in institutional knowledge and feelings that may accumulate over time to mirror the legal norms; third, the political culture that prevails at a given time in the formal political sphere, the media and more broadly in society. The

<sup>1</sup> It is outside the scope of this article to give a thorough account of the historical development of a sociology of emotions. For an excellent synthesis see Jack Barbalet’s *Emotion, Social Theory, and Social Structure. A Macrosociological Approach*, 2002.

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