

MICHAEL GIFFIN

# A CULTURAL HISTORY OF TERRORISM



MICHAEL BURLEIGH HAS become fiercely distinguished. He's a regular contributor to *Standpoint*—a newish *Quadrant*-like magazine in Britain—as well as a member of its advisory board. He's written several acclaimed books; *Earthly Powers* (2007) and *Sacred Causes* (2008) explore the politics of religion, and the religion of politics, from the French Revolution to the War on Terror. His recent book, *Blood and Rage* (2010), deserves to be widely read as his subject is topical and his treatment magisterial.

Burleigh highlights the chameleon-like adaptability of global terrorists embedded throughout the West whose agenda is creating chaos, fomenting sectarian or tribal conflict, and preventing democracy from succeeding. As a Briton he naturally focuses on the European context but Australia is definitely within his horizon. He praises Peter Coleman's *The Liberal Conspiracy* (1989) as outstanding in its description of the lengths the West took during the Cold War to advertise the superiority of its freedoms over Marxist-Leninist totalitarianism. He seems to feel Australia is doing a better job than Britain in addressing the challenge of terrorism as a cultural phenomenon, although perhaps not as good a job as the United States.

Burleigh begins with the mid-nineteenth century when technology allowed terrorism to adopt its modern form. He sketches terrorists' life histories and actions rather than the theories that validate them, since he's interested in the choices terrorists make during their journey, and because ideology is simply the detonator that allows a pre-existing chemical mix to explode. As his book tries to make crystal clear—especially to anyone who harbours a sneaking admiration for those

who wish to change the world by violence—the milieu of terrorists is always morally squalid when not merely criminal.

CHAPTER ONE, “Green: The Fenian Dynamiters”, describes the tensions preceding St Patrick's Day in 1858, when an organisation was founded that eventually became the Irish Republican Brotherhood, or the Fenians, the historical core of the Irish Republican Army. Fenianism encompassed a range of activities, from harmless conviviality and labour activism at the legal end of the spectrum to

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rural disturbances, insurrection and terrorism on the illegal margins. Its strategy, derived from the 1798 Wolfe Tone rebellion, was to create Irish opportunities out of British imperial difficulties in the Crimean War, the Indian Mutiny, the Zulu and Sudan and Boer Wars, as well as the crises in Anglo-French relations in the 1850s, Anglo-American relations in the 1860s, and Anglo-Russian relations in the 1880s. The movement drew upon the wider Irish emigration, especially mainland Britain, and the United States where fond hearts filled with hatred as the complexities of Ireland were lost in Atlantic translation. Financial support came from wealthy Irish Americans; military expertise came from Irish American soldiers, including Civil War veterans who delayed their demobilisation. As Fenian culture was heavily indebted to secret societies, arcane rituals, and masonic oaths and signs, the Catholic Church was unsympathetic. The United States government has remained culpably indulgent towards Irish terrorism until relatively recently.

The early Fenian notion of a people's army representing the oppressed nation's will through insurrectionary violence was gradually displaced by the notion of terror campaigns designed to sap the morale of the imperial army. These tactics changed because there was no substantial support for an insurrection, a truth concealed within the Fenians' own analysis:

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*Blood and Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism*,  
by Michael Burleigh;  
HarperCollins, 2010, 608 pages, \$24.95.

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“We should oppose a general insurrection in Ireland as untimely and ill-advised. But we believe in action nonetheless. The Irish cause requires Skirmishers. It requires a little band of heroes who will initiate and keep up without intermission guerrilla warfare—men who will fly over land and sea like invisible beings—now striking the enemy in Ireland, now in India, now in England itself as occasion may present.” This conceit of an enlightened vanguard would become familiar to all modern terrorists.

This chapter describes the trajectory of Fenian terrorism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—both shambolic failures and tragic successes—with graphic descriptions of its instruments of terror, mainly the new technology of dynamite. We read about the suffering of terrorism’s victims, and the heroism of many ordinary policemen and civilians who intercepted attacks. Burleigh also describes the Fenian manipulation of public opinion, mainly outside of Ireland, as terrorists became martyrs who generated widespread sympathy. This created a dilemma for British politicians from all parties pursuing a moderate reform agenda for Ireland. While the terrorists remained at the extreme margins of Irish politics, did one treat them as criminals or political prisoners? The need to maintain law and order had to be balanced against the spiral of violence this might unleash, and the political repercussions in Ireland and further afield, especially in the United States where politicians were hungry for the Irish American vote.

**C**HAPTER TWO, “Red: Russian Nihilists and Revolutionaries”, argues that as in pre-revolutionary France, the most critical time for pre-revolutionary Russia was when it conceded limited reforms. Alexander II, who ascended in 1855, embarked on a program of liberalisation after the Crimean War exposed Russian backwardness. His principal measures were emancipating the serfs; modernising provincial government, the law courts, and the army; and opening universities to students from modest backgrounds. Discontent developed because he wouldn’t consider constitutional concessions, thereby antagonising Western-oriented liberals who wanted some form of parliamentary government. There were other pressures too: universities became places of dissent because, while higher education expanded, there was no increase in positions for humanities graduates; emancipated serfs had to compensate their former masters for relinquishing a valuable commodity; landowners faced an ugly mood from peasants who felt they had been defrauded.

Russian revolutionaries came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds where political goals ranged from the liberal to the totalitarian. In the begin-

ning, these revolutionaries shared an idealistic fantasy called Populism: the belief that once the crushing weight of autocracy was lifted by revolution the structures and habits of socialism inherent in the traditional peasant commune would be revealed. This fantasy, which many became disillusioned with, gradually gave way to the characteristic Russian nihilism of later terrorists, aided and abetted by a range of phenomena: a hypocritical intelligentsia, educated women who had no outlets for their energies, the effects of industrialisation, the Left-liberal press, liberal-minded judges, and a regime that—while repressive by our standards—wasn’t nearly as repressive as it could have been, and certainly wasn’t as oppressive as the Soviet regime.

This chapter describes the trajectory of Russian nihilism in the late nineteenth century—both shambolic failures and tragic successes—including biographies of the men and women behind Land and Freedom, the Organisation (and the tighter group within it called Hell), People’s Will, and representatives of the regime who monitored and occasionally infiltrated these nihilist groups. By the end of the century it seemed terrorism had subsided, since between 1860 and 1900 only one hundred people had been killed by terrorism, although one of them did happen to be the tsar. However, the first decade of the new century saw a massive escalation of atrocities, as nihilism gave way to Bolshevism, with seventeen thousand people killed between 1901 and 1916, before even these shocking statistics were dwarfed by the onset of Bolshevik state violence. There were various reasons for this recrudescence of terrorism on a huge scale: the disaster of the Russo-Japanese war, Bloody Sunday, irresponsible sympathy from the intelligentsia for the terrorists rather than for the regime’s efforts to reform itself, and Nicholas II’s tentative attempts at reform—specifically the Imperial Manifesto—which incentivised revolutionaries who saw them as a sign of weakness to be exploited.

**C**HAPTER THREE, “Black: Anarchists and Terrorism”, introduces those anarchists of the nineteenth century, including some who never touched a stick of dynamite, who theorised the violence Fenians and nihilists practised. Their precursors were the organised banditry and conspiratorial societies of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Europe, notably Babeuf’s “Conspiracy of the Equals” which ruled France after 9th Thermidor and the execution of Robespierre. Babeuf had faith in the redemptive powers of chaos: “May everything return to chaos, and out of chaos may there emerge a new and regenerated world.” His co-conspirator and biographer Buonarroti pioneered the view: “No means are criminal which are employed to obtain a sacred end.” Or,

as Malatesta once claimed: “The revolution consists more in deeds than words ... each time a spontaneous movement of the people erupts ... it is the duty of every revolutionary socialist to declare his solidarity with the movement in the making.” The obvious inspiration for the latter was the Paris Commune of 1871, in which 25,000 people were killed.

This chapter provides biographies of the leading theoreticians of anarchy, including Heinzen, and a leading apologist, Kropotkin. There are also biographies of anarchists of action, including Most, also known as “General Boom Boom”, who travelled widely in Europe, Britain, and the United States where he promoted violence in the already violent labour disputes of the 1870s and 1880s. While there was no single anarchist conspiracy, or party animating anarchist deeds, the press sedulously promoted the idea of a worldwide army of anarchists bent on destroying bourgeois civilisation. The anarchists themselves promoted the idea of an international conspiracy, aided by improved telegraphy and abetted by the widespread coverage they received in the newspapers. Their goal was to assassinate as many world leaders as possible; they were successful in many cases, but they also maintained a resentful desire to inflict chaos on ordinary people going about unremarkable lives.

Refusing to take lessons in good governance from concerned friendly governments, the British persisted in maintaining liberal asylum laws, which anarchists abused, as terrorists still do today. One minor concession was the Metropolitan Police hauling in anyone who looked like an anarchist—since there was an identifiable sartorial code in such circles—in order to photograph them and compile a list of their names. While there were a few fitful attempts to organise international police co-operation, Britain insisted that anarchist violence could be adequately contained by existing domestic laws, lending some substance to G.K. Chesterton’s surreal vision, in *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908), of the police chasing anarchists who were themselves. Joseph Conrad was too admiringly grateful to Britain to breach its unspoken etiquette by publicly criticising its liberal asylum laws, but he did mildly observe: “All these people are not revolutionaries—they are shams.” Edward Garnett paid him an immense if backhanded compliment when reviewing *The Secret Agent* (1907): “It is good for us English to have Mr Conrad in our midst visualising for us aspects of life we are constitutionally unable to perceive.”

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CHAPTER FOUR, “Death in the Sun: Terror and Decolonisation”, provides concise histories of three political economies and the trajectories of terrorism and counter-terrorism within them. First is the British Mandate of Palestine, where at the beginning the ratio of Arabs to Jews was 8:1 and informed Arab opinion welcomed further Zionist immigration. However, as the Zionists regarded themselves as co-colonisers, and more Zionists arrived than the economy could absorb, Arabs became alarmed at the prospect of Jewish hegemony. By 1930 the British were shocked by the extent of Arab pauperisation but did nothing to alleviate it through aid or investment. Broadly speaking, the Zionist establishment was socialist or Marxist, but there was an anti-Marxist nationalist movement which hoped a Jewish state could be created quickly through terrorist violence against the British. Whether from left or right, Jewish and Arab terrorists were equally brutal, and many of them became statesmen after the Mandate ended. Also, the Nazis were instrumental in contributing to an enduring propaganda, which transformed Muslim disdain for Jews—with whom they had coexisted peacefully for centuries—into Muslim fear of Jews as powerful global conspirators.

Second is Algeria during the final decades of French rule. France conquered Algeria in a series of murderous campaigns between 1830 and 1870. Although the rhetoric of *mission civilisatrice* was espoused, Algeria was run in the interests of a tough-minded colonial minority while the majority Muslim population of Arabs and Berbers were in a condition of impoverished tutelage. Nationalist organisations emerged in the 1920s, as did organisations that favoured a puritanical form of Islam. There were also communists, organised from 1935 onwards, as well as liberal leaders who sought assimilation into France. The magic aura of French invincibility was broken after the Second World War and defeat in Indo-China, but French concessions to Algerian autonomy were too little, too late. The gruesome results of years of terrorism and counter-terrorism are carefully described. Communist militants and Catholic priests were especially active in making torture known to the wider public. In September 1957, the secretary-general of police in Algiers resigned, because he recognised on the bodies of detainees: “the deep marks of abuse or torture that I personally endured fourteen years ago in the basement of the Gestapo in Nancy”. So much for the *mission civilisatrice*.

Third is South Africa under apartheid. While Black

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Africans were already subject to restrictive laws under British rule, these intensified in 1948 when a National Party victory brought an all-Afrikaner cabinet to power. While Black Africans traditionally advocated passive resistance—in the early years most members of the African National Congress came from a Christian background—after 1960 the ANC was forced to direct violence in order to control it. The terrorist arm of the ANC was never as effective as other terrorist organisations, however, and most leaders of other African states believed apartheid was an internal matter for South Africa and promoted a non-violent solution. The Soweto uprising and death of Steve Biko in 1977 forced the ANC to step up terrorist attacks, which led to a White exodus from a misconceived Afrikaner cause.

**C**HAPTER FIVE, “Attention-Seeking: Black September and International Terrorism”, traces the origins of international terrorism—that is, the terrorism aimed at interfering with the sovereignty of a foreign nation—and the counter-terrorist response. First, we learn about the fifty-two armed Palestinian groups active in Jordan by the late 1960s. Sometimes Yasser Arafat appeared to be in control of these groups but mostly he preferred the chaos of flitting from one attention-seeking drama to another. King Hussein spent several years trying to control these armed groups trying to overthrow his regime. He finally succeeded in expelling Arafat and his followers at the end of a conflict known as Black September. They regrouped in Lebanon in 1971, where they established a parallel government, carried out bank robberies and kidnappings, and destabilised one of the few parliamentary democracies ever to have existed in the Middle East.

Second, we learn about the organisation known as Black September, a terrorist cell within Fatah, formed by Arafat to take revenge upon Jordan. Black September assassinated the Jordanian prime minister during a visit to Cairo, machine-gunned the Jordanian ambassador to Britain, massacred five Jordanians in Germany thought to have collaborated with Israel, attacked an oil pipeline near Hamburg, blew up oil storage tanks in Holland, and conducted a range of high-profile hijackings. Black September became notorious for the kidnap and murder of eleven Israeli athletes and officials, and a German policeman, during the 1972 Munich Olympics. The events in Munich are carefully described, from the terrorists’ planning to the execution of their plan, as is the shambolic German response. As the world mourned the dead hostages, the bodies of the dead terrorists were flown to Libya where they were welcomed as martyrs. One of the masterminds quietly slipped out of East Germany to Lebanon where he was accorded a hero’s welcome. Arafat embraced him saying: “I love you as my son.”

Third, we learn about the events following Munich. Israel raided PLO guerrillas in southern Lebanon and sent letter bombs to Fatah leaders in Egypt. Black September murdered Mossad agents, assassinated a Syrian radio reporter suspected of collaborating with Mossad, and letter bombs began arriving at Israeli embassies around the world. The Israeli prime minister, Golda Meir, approved a new counter-terrorist unit in Mossad, code-named Caesarea, which undertook attacks against PLO operatives around the world. Black September retaliated by invading the Israeli embassy in Bangkok, attacking the Saudi embassy in Khartoum—where at Arafat’s orders the US ambassador, his deputy, and the Belgian chargé d’affaires were taken to the basement and executed—and attempting to assassinate Golda Meir as she arrived in Rome to visit the Pope. Caesarea continued targeting the PLO leadership in Lebanon, whereupon Palestinians and Lebanese leftists began clashing with a government they believed was turning a blind eye to Israeli incursions. On and on it goes until 1979 when Mossad finally eliminated that same mastermind of Munich, who had since found his way onto the CIA payroll. Now there’s something to think about.

**C**HAPTER SIX, “Guilty White Kids: The Red Brigades and the Red Army Faction”, reminds us that in Italy, until comparatively recently, the extreme Right and extreme Left both wanted to destabilise democracy and foment totalitarian revolution. On the political Left, a pragmatic “historic compromise”—an attempt to reconcile communist collectivism with Christian Democrat solidarism—was reached in 1973. This was to avert a CIA-backed Chilean-style military coup in Italy, which was no idle fantasy in the early 1970s. The compromise was perceived as a betrayal by those who sought to convert widespread discontent into a revolution. In Italy between 1969 and 1986 there were some 14,491 terrorist attacks; 1182 people were wounded and 419 were killed; 193 deaths were caused by right-wing terrorists, 143 were attributed to the extreme Left, sixty-three were attributed to Middle Eastern terrorist groups operating in Italy. Burleigh argues Italian universities were a prime source of the Left fanaticism that fuelled terrorism. This was a new development, since from the end of the war to the late 1950s Italian students were more likely to be fervent supporters of the Right; however, the mindless economically-driven over-expansion of higher education was largely responsible for student unrest. In 1965 competitive entrance exams to university were abolished, enrolments doubled within a few years, some universities held over ten times the student population they were designed for, facilities were stretched to breaking point, by the 1970s there were three times as many students in Italy as in Britain, academics refused

to adjust from elite to mass institutions, and liberal-minded administrators cowed before student radicals.

In West Germany the 1960s brought deep intergenerational problems to young people who sought deliverance from their bored selves. Older people prided themselves on having raised Germany from dust and rubble, achieving a conspicuously high standard of living through their industriousness. The consumer society was their reward, but for younger people, ashamed of being German, and taking high living standards for granted, this economic vocation no longer sufficed. Like their French contemporaries, morally self-righteous middle-class young Germans threw around charges of Fascism—or Auschwitz, Gestapo or Nazi—at anyone they disagreed with, thereby damaging democratic discourse and ensuring only their increasingly totalitarian voices were heard. The intolerance of these radicalised students reminded their professors of scenes they had witnessed in the 1930s when many if not most students had been fervent Nazis. They were encouraged in their radical snobbery by the gurus of the New Left: Marcuse, Horkheimer, Adorno, and the younger Habermas, whose ideology was a fusion of Freud and Marx leavened with a bit of Gramsci; as a former German terrorist quipped: “theory was something that we half read but fully understood”. The Red Army Faction was active between 1970 and 1998. It committed numerous operations and was held responsible for dozens of deaths. There were three successive “generations” of the faction, all of which were harboured, trained and otherwise supported by the East German secret police: the Stasi.

CHAPTER SEVEN, “Small-Nation Terror”, is about the Basque conflict and the Troubles. Some Basque anthropologists claim Basques descended from cave-dwelling bipeds without evolutionary contact with anyone else; a view reinforced by the fact that the Basque language, Euskera, is autochthonous, meaning it has no linguistic relationship with the Indo-European tongues of its neighbours. Just as the Irish see themselves as romantic victims of British colonialism, the Basques see themselves as romantic victims of Spanish colonialism. They believe in a political version of a fall from grace, the loss of historic liberties, when they were a political entity with unique rights, exemptions, and privileges within the kingdom of Navarre. Since the early nineteenth century, the realities of the modern world have challenged Basque nationalists who, again like the Irish, compulsively explore their hurt

like a person using his tongue to probe a disintegrating tooth. One major distinction is religion. In Ireland many priests remained IRA cheerleaders without offering logistic support; however, Basque Homeland and Freedom (ETA) was able to use seminaries and retreats to hold covert meetings, while a substantial number of lapsed seminarians brought a moralising single-mindedness to killing people. Burleigh provides us with an immensely useful overview of Basque terrorism, including the support the CIA gave to training Basque terrorists before the USA decided to leave Franco in place during the Cold War, allowing him to repress the Basques with impunity. ETA is still engaged in armed struggle, and partly finances itself by extorting vast sums from Basque businesses. In Burleigh’s words: “ETA has waded sufficiently far out into a river of blood that it cannot psychologically turn back.”

This chapter also provides an excellent overview of the Troubles. It’s useful to be reminded of why Northern Ireland came into being in 1921, of how it had its own devolved government and parliament until the Troubles began in 1972, of how it was once a stable economic powerhouse, of the ethno-political divisions between a predominantly Catholic minority claiming to represent Irish nationalists and a predominantly Protestant majority claiming to represent British unionists, of the successes being made to end the cold war between Dublin and Belfast before the Troubles made that process harder. But the real eye-opener is the way Burleigh sketches these terrorists’ life histories and actions, reminding us of how—regardless of what side they belong to—terrorists are first and foremost thugs and criminals from the lower socioeconomic spectrum. It’s also important to remember the atavistic support of Irish Americans for the republican cause, not just from those in Boston or New York but from billionaires all over the nation rich enough to donate large sums to anything anti-British. While Sinn Féin and the IRA had a vast propaganda and fund-raising operation in the USA, the unionists were never as adroit on the world stage as the nationalists. One missed opportunity was their failure to emphasise the unsavoury affiliation Sinn Féin and the IRA had with other terrorist organisations including ETA and the PLO.

CHAPTER EIGHT, “World Rage: Islamist Terrorism”, begins with a salutary reminder of how it began. In 1978 President Carter visited Iran and did something one should never do with radical Islamists. He sent mixed messages to the regime—lauding the nation as an island of stability while

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criticising the Shah's human rights record—thus triggering a revolution. Within a year, the new regime had killed the three thousand political prisoners Carter was so exercised about plus more people than the Shah's secret police had killed in the previous twenty-five years.

This revolution was for export. Two immediate manifestations were Islamic Jihad, created by Palestinian admirers of Khomeini, and Hizbollah, the latter located in Lebanon but bankrolled by Iran. The suicide bombings that followed alarmed Muslim rulers, especially the Saudis, who were responsible for protecting Mecca, whose infrastructure had been improved by bin Laden. When the Grand Mosque was attacked by militants in 1979, the Saudis required assistance to expel them. After two weeks of close-quarter combat, the militants were captured; a task made easier when bin Laden's construction firm—which had refurbished the mosque—provided the blueprints essential to storming it.

In Egypt in the 1920s, a flourishing Western modernity triggered an inevitable Islamic response in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood, which sought to contain Western influences. Following an unsuccessful assassination attempt on Nasser's life in 1954, Brotherhood property was burned, six of its leaders were hanged, and others disappeared into prison, including Sayyid Qutb, who by the time of his release in 1964 had become the leading Islamist ideologue of the Brotherhood: one of his future disciples being the young bin Laden. In Algeria in the 1980s, the Islamic Salvation Front was formed, the first legal Islamic party in the Arab world, and the first to proclaim the goal of an Islamic republic. But only one-fifth of Muslims live in the Arab world; and in Indonesia, Muslim militias played an important part in fighting the Dutch colonists, but broke with the newly-established republic over its refusal to introduce sharia law. Radical Islam survived in Indonesia because it was useful in the suppression of communism, and inflows of Saudi money—which Burleigh argues at length, elsewhere, is a necessary but mixed blessing—supported the seminary run by two clerics, including Abu Bakar Bashir, the spiritual head of Jemaah Islamiyah, who has been linked with terrorist attacks on bars and cinemas since the early 1970s. In Pakistan, sharia law was introduced as a preliminary measure to establishing an Islamic society. In Afghanistan, the murder of president Daoud in 1978 instituted a reign of anti-Islamic terror, followed by the Russian equivalent of Vietnam, and the rise of the Taliban.

The scene is now set for Burleigh's comprehensive and fast-moving global documentary of radical Islamism and the role of al Qaeda within it. While studiously maintaining that radical Islam doesn't rep-

resent Islam generally, Burleigh reminds us that the ultimate goal of radical Islam is to realise a Caliphate in which political power and religious power are fused, and whose hypothetical boundaries encompass the Christian, Confucian, Jewish, and Hindu populations of Spain, the Balkans, Greece, central Africa, India and Indonesia. We also need to recognise that salafist jihadists—Muslims who support violent jihad—have no positive vision; they only promote sectarian, tribal and anti-Western bloodshed and violence. If this is clearly understood by enough people, the war on terror may be shorter than it otherwise might be.

Looking back over the history of terrorism, we can see any number of ideological causes which once fed violent passions but which have passed into oblivion. These things take time. The Cold War lasted from 1947 to 1989. On that scale, we are at the equivalent of 1953 in the current global struggle.

**B**URLEIGH ENDS HIS book with a reflection on what can be done to win the war on terror, which is in many ways an intergenerational struggle. We need to think carefully about the language we use and how we use it. We need to avoid generalising about a complex subject: for example, several unsavoury regimes use the war to suppress voices that have nothing to do with radical Islam. We need to remember that many Muslims around the world no more wish to live in theocracies than Westerners do. Because of this, we should audit the amount of resources spent on promoting Western freedoms; for example, the USA doesn't really need to burnish Brand America when the world's enterprising classes are queuing up for entry.

Burleigh believes Islam is a more territorial religion than Christianity or Judaism, with no tradition of the Christian separation of temporal and spiritual, or the Jewish acceptance of the host society and its laws. We see the effect of this in Western Europe, which is witnessing the gradual emergence of Muslim no-go areas—enclaves revolving around nodal mosques and community centres—and public housing projects or rows of private terraced houses from which the White population is decamping because they feel alienated in their own country. Lax immigration policies, cheap flights and phone calls, and satellite television mean many immigrants don't make the mental break with home that is normative in the USA. Instead they simply transplant their home villages to British cities. What's happening in Australia, whose migrant context exists somewhere between the experience of Britain and the USA? It would be interesting to hear what Burleigh has to say about that.