

# On the Will of Others

Abbas El-Zein

Talk given at a session titled *A Question of Tolerance: Why is Difference so Difficult to Accept?* at the Byron Bay Writers Festival, 2001 with Tohby Riddle, Melissa Lucashenko, Donald Horne and Mungo MacCallum

In 1910, a Lebanese community leader in Victoria, Mr Wadii Abu Rizk, wrote to Alfred Deakin, the prime minister of the day and one of the chief architects of immigration policies, contesting the classification of his compatriots as “Asians” and calling for a higher intake of migrants from Syria. Lebanon did not exist as a nation back then and the Lebanese were referred to as Syrians.

He wrote the following in his letter. ‘Syrians are Caucasians and they are a white race as much as the English. Their looks, habits, customs, religions, blood etc., are those of Europeans but they are more intelligent.’<sup>1</sup>

It is not clear whether Mr Abu Rizk considered the English to be Europeans. Officials of the White Australia policy would have approved of a vision in which the English were an ideal of racial superiority. But there would have been a few raised eyebrows if the writer of the letter was suggesting that he, for example, had more brains than its right-honourable recipient. Unsurprisingly, the letter did not have the desired effect. Syrians were viewed more favourably than the Chinese and the East Asians by Immigration officials; but there is no evidence of a major change of policy between the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 and the Nationality Bill of 1920.

It is not too fanciful to imagine that the immigration official, on whose desk the letter had landed, might have circulated an internal memo pointing out that Syrians are ‘a kind of Asian race, only more pompous.’

There is something pathetically heroic about Mr Abu Rizk’s assertion of superiority from within a racial classification which put him in the lower reaches of the system. It is subversive because it turns the mainstream’s construction of difference on its head, even if Mr Abu Rizk himself may not have seen it this way and I don’t know whether he did.

Now let me move forward by about ninety years. In 1999, during the last Balkan war, a certain Sabit Salihu was on the news in Australia for a few weeks. Salihu was a refugee

---

<sup>1</sup> Source: A.T. Yarwood, *Asian Migration to Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1964, p 145.

among three thousands five hundreds Kosovars flown to Australia from camps in Macedonia. But he was an uncommonly outspoken refugee. He complained about conditions in the refuge offered to his family in Singleton, an army barrack in the Hunter valley, three hours to the north of Sydney. Initially, Salihu was one among eighty refugees who refused to get off the bus which drove them to Singleton, all of whom backed off thirty-two hours later, after they were refused food and drink on the bus, all except Mr Salihu's family.

Salihu insisted that conditions in Singleton were not suitable for his old mother who was chronically ill, with heart, respiratory and kidney problems. He cited lack of privacy among other things. When he was given a choice between Singleton and a return to the Macedonian camps on the border with Kosovo, he opted for the latter. After the war, Salihu and his family returned to Kosovo from Macedonia. His home had been ransacked but, luckily, not burnt. He became unemployed but turned down a job as a translator with the Polish army because he believed the salary he was offered was below the going rate. Before the war, he had lost his job as a factory driver when he refused to pledge loyalty to Serbia in writing.

Taken in almost any different context, Salihu could have become a darling of the media. A proud Australian, say, a hard-working man escaping war and persecution, insisting on fair payment, requiring respect for his privacy and appropriate conditions for his ill mother, and refusing to be cowed by a bullying foreign government and an aggressive local media, would have almost certainly become a hero. Instead, Salihu was called 'ungrateful', 'rebellious', 'shameful' and branded as the 'ringleader of refugee trouble-makers' by the Government and the media. There were, of course, exceptions in the media. Some reporters had sympathy for Salihu and even offered him help.

Salihu was supposed to look the way refugees looked and behave the way refugees were thought to behave: helpless, war weary, happy with anything short of Serbian death squads and, most of all, grateful. In fact that was the word that came up most frequently in the coverage of the refugees. Yet "gratitude" is suspect when it becomes a defining element of the relationship between "host" and "guest". It can turn the act of giving into an act of emotional bondage. It does not allow the guest to be anything but a reflection of the host's supposed generosity. Involuntary gratitude is, after all, a contradiction in terms and that is precisely what we seem to ask of those refugees we accept. As to those we don't accept, we make them pay dearly for having dared to ask. And you all know that story.

Now in social life, we call ungrateful those who have failed to acknowledge our kindness, or those who have harmed or betrayed us, after accepting what we have offered them. We do not feel entitled to call someone ungrateful simply because he or she has turned down our

hospitality which they believe to be inadequate—especially if it's winter and what we have offered them is a tin shack in the backyard which is closely watched by armed bouncers, because we make no secret of the fact that we're suspicious of their ulterior motives! In fact, we would expect anyone with enough self-respect to do just that.

Salihu was not vilified because he was ungrateful. It doesn't make sense. He was vilified because he dared express his will and act independently of our own. We could not forgive him that. Difference, of course, is not difficult to accept at all. We consume it and cherish it every day; from the new piece of clothes that we buy, to our next travel destinations and the strangers we will speak to on the train. Not only do we accept difference all the time, we are actively seeking it every day. What is hard to accept is difference with an independent will and an ability to act on that will.

Without underestimating the incredible progress we have made by moving away from the White Australia policy, the system Abu Rizk faced ninety years ago appears like a crude version of what Sabit Salihu has come up against. Abu Rizk was the Other back then because of his race. The 'refugee' is the Other today. I am tempted to say that the old system was less hypocritical. And it is perhaps true. But that doesn't make it better. Nationalised migrants—and I am one of them—are better off today than their counterparts fifty years ago. Besides, the fact that the government is forced into the crudest rhetorical hypocrisies to get away with its human-rights violations is not a bad thing. I mean it is better than having a government who owns to these violations and attempts to justify them by resorting to racial categories.

Our claims to moral universalisms look more ridiculous than ever and yet today, we need them more than ever. We lecture China on how it should deal with its prisoners while putting innocent men, women and children in camps in the middle of the desert; we launch wars against a foe ostensibly because it has failed to heed a UN resolution while turning a blind eye to a friend who tramples many. Salihu—and the monstrosity that our refugee policy has become—is a straight-forward and eloquent illustration of the breakdown of these universalisms because we are using racial, national and class categories as an excuse to apply different moral standards than those we apply to ourselves, our kin and our tribe. I don't know about you but, personally, this is the difference I will always find hardest to accept.