

THE ETHICS AND POLITICS OF STARVATION

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Conversation 'score' for a panel discussion featuring Mark Goudkemp (replacing Ian Rintoul), Kiran Grewal, and Aychara Ram Sivan. Performance Space Sydney, 7 March 2013.

Last year when a group of detainees in Nauru went on hunger strike, I was intrigued by reports stating that a handful of Hindu Tamil asylum seekers amongst them were simultaneously undertaking a religious fast. I wanted to think further about this overlap of religious-philosophical and political beliefs, that when acted upon risked death.

Much of my research work has considered death in defining the state; specifically an authority's right to kill or control the terms of life, pitted against an individual's decision to take their own life — both as expressions of sovereignty.

As the Pacific Solution is re-activated via the rhetoric of 'No Advantage', and attention turns again to the camps on both Nauru and Manus Island, I have come to understand the processes of offshore detention as a 'banal horror' that undergirds civic life in Australia.

The folly of all such calculations lies in supposing that you can ever get good results from starvation.

George Orwell — *The Politics of Starvation* 18 January 1946

George Orwell's *The Politics of Starvation*, the starting point of my enquiries, was written in the aftermath of World War II as food rationing was expected to be lifted in the United Kingdom. In the short essay Orwell addresses domestic resistance to the organisation *Save Europe Now* and their campaign to voluntarily send surplus food to parts of continental Europe on the brink of famine — areas largely in the border zones between the jurisdictions of the USSR and the Allies. Orwell pointedly cautions against the use of food for political means, to either punish or persuade.

Two broad themes I would like to broach in this discussion are:

- self-starvation or hunger strike as a political tool
 - the rationing of food or control of food supplies to manage populations
- via an understanding that eating practices can have both cultural and political connotations.

HUNGER STRIKE



Peaceful Hunger Strike Nauru Detention Camp 8 Nov 2012
Photo: Clint Rawcliff Deidenang

In August 2012, the Australian government announced it would recommence processing asylum seekers in the small Pacific Island nation of Nauru.

By October 381 people had been transferred from established processing centres in Christmas Island and Darwin to live in makeshift tent facilities for indefinite periods of time, and amidst concerns regarding the camp conditions, costs and welfare of the asylum seekers (Cullen, 2012).

On 16 November 2012 a 35-year-old Iranian asylum seeker, Omid Sorousheh was taken to Nauru hospital after thirty-six days on hunger strike. He was returned to the Nauru Regional Processing Centre on 25 November and under the watch of four security guards, after the hospital declared it was no longer able to care for him.

In a statement released on 25 November Omid declared:

I will not stop my hunger strike until they transfer me back to Australia or I will die here [on Nauru]. What is the difference between me and the others who come [to Australia] after 13th of August [and who will] be given bridging visas and be released to Australia? But me and 399 more must be stay here in [Nauru] in a very bad situation. (Refugee Action Coalition, 2012).

The Nauru government claimed to have no knowledge of the situation. (Maley, 2012)

On 30 November, and close to death, Omid was air lifted from Nauru and taken to Brisbane, Australia for treatment after fifty days on hunger strike. The Department of Immigration released a statement saying that he would be returned to immigration detention at Nauru as soon as he was deemed fit to travel.



Picture source: <http://visualizingpalestine.org/infographic/hunger-strike>

Omid's evacuation was followed by a series of scuffles, 'self-harms and attempted suicides' (McClymont et al, 2012). According to activists and sources on Nauru another man had also been on strike for more than thirty days, and at least another eighteen detainees had joined the hunger strike a week prior. All hunger strikers were demanding that Nauru be closed and that asylum seekers there be returned to Australia to have their claims processed (RAC, 2012).

According to reports, at its height the Nauru hunger strike involved around 300 people. Many stopped after twelve days when they were informed that Amnesty International would inspect the island.

After visiting the processing centre in late November, Amnesty International also called for the processing centre in Nauru to be closed in a report that admonishes the Australian Government for 'spectacularly failing in its duty of care to asylum seekers', as well as stating that it can see no purpose for holding asylum seekers on Nauru other than to penalise them (Amnesty International, 2012).

As detainees were transferred to an Australian immigration detention centre operating in the remote Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, reports confirmed that hunger strikes had spread to there as well, after asylum seekers were informed that it could take four to six years for their claims to be processed (Hall, 2012).

In early December Omid Sorousheh returned to Nauru, interpreted as a signal from the Australian government that it would not acquiesce to the asylum seekers' preference for death.

Ian

What has happened to Omid?

What were the consequences of his hunger strike?

Who is responsible for the immigration camps there?

Is Australia, Nauru or PNG handling the processing of claims?

Is there a clear strategy — why are some people being taken to Nauru or Manus Island in PNG?

A number of Hindu Tamils who participated in the November hunger strike in Nauru were also observing a religious six-day fast (Hall, 2012), a period of fasting after the Diwali festival known as *Skanda Shasti*.

Rami

Could you explain Skanda Shasti?

Could you explain the reason for fasting (as an ascetic practice)?

[Rami discusses suicide and the notion of a conscious death in the Hindu tradition.]

ENCODING DEATH

Death presents the limits of our knowledge and experience therefore the rituals surrounding death have important social implications. In less secular parts of the world the authority to encode death with certain meanings is often the realm of religious orders eg. the church's ability to cast martyrs, saints and grant personal salvation.



Rayner Hoff *Sacrifice* 1934, Shrine Of Remembrance, Sydney.
Photo: Russell Rmeiklej, 2006

Following the pattern of secular democracy in the West, this authority was transferred to the state as a notion of state sacrifice for the common good, eg. the state's ability to send its citizens to war and immortalise their dead as heroes. The emergence of civic religiosity also alludes to a notion of war that underpins peaceable, civic life.

In colonial contexts, the state's authority over death is what enables it to kill, enslave and control the pre-existing population and supersede already existing forms of order and governance (Michelsen, 2010). As such, taking control of one's life, in the sense of *taking one's own life*, is the absolute annunciation of self-determination, liberty and ultimately sovereignty (Mbembe, 2003).

CAMP MENTALITY

During the first era of the Pacific Solution, Nauru operated an Australian-funded offshore detention/processing centre from September 2001 until February 2008.

Over this time it processed more than 12,000 detainees at costs to the Australian taxpayer amounting to \$1 billion over five years, which is more than \$500,000 per person processed, seven times more than it would have cost to do so on the mainland.

It operated amidst criticisms of poor living conditions, inadequate food, poor treatment of children and access to legal services, claims of torture, child abuse, campaigns of self harm and hunger strikes, riots, deterioration of human rights, concerns about the psychological effects of isolation and indefinite detention, evidence of *refoulement* (at least nine Afghan asylum seekers were killed in Afghanistan after being rejected by Australia), unclear jurisdiction, and appeals to New Zealand to intervene (Bacon, 2012).

Ian/Kiran

What are the rights of asylum seekers?

DUTY OF CARE

I actually liken it to a concentration camp, but the Australians don't have the guts to kill these people and put them out of their misery.

— Marianne Evers (Barlow, 2013).

All

Does this current response to asylum seekers resemble the operations of war?

Referring to Marianne's statement, it is not a regular war where one kills the adversary, but rather one in which the subjects of governmental policies are 'let live', in order to contain, control and as some have suggested punish?

What is revealed by such arrangements of power?

What are the intentions/benefits/consequences of this strategy?

SPECIES-BEING



John Gerrard *Grow Finish Unit* (near Elkhart, Kansas) 2008

The artist John Gerrard tracks the development of nitrogen and the discovery of oil to that of contemporary industrial farming and modern warfare.

He suggests that the subsequent population boom and current conditions, whereby more than half of the world's population is reliant on chemical fertilisers in order to eat, marks the emergence of a new kind of 'species-being' (Morris and Gerrard, 2009).

Obviously the availability of food effects the size and distribution of a population. Australian populations expanded with the establishment of wheat and barley fields and the establishment of pastures for grazing — the 'taming of the bush' — historically linked to colonial expansion, and the consequent control and death of the indigenous populations.

This history allows for mythical readings of the landscape and its ability to support life as well as being inscribed by death.

GEOPHILOSOPHICALLY THINKING



Nauru is a raised atoll comprising coral and limestone approximately 22km square with a maximum elevation of 61m. The topside of the island was once a rich source of phosphates and nitrogen — essential to modern agriculture — derived from layers of marine fossils and bird droppings.

It is the world's smallest island nation with a population of around 10,000 located 3000km from the East coast of Australia and about 300km from its nearest neighbour.



Nauru satellite photo 2011

The first record of European contact with Nauru is from 1798, by John Hearn, Captain of the British whaling ship the *Hunter*, who named it *Pleasant Island*. In this period the island would have seemed similar to an idealised 'Island Paradise'; ringed by coral reef, with a lush rainforest at its centre and large freshwater lagoon.

In 1888 the island was annexed by the German Empire. The next year the Pacific Islands Company discovered that a rock sample from Nauru being used as a doorstep in their office in Sydney contained 78% phosphate — which they deduced would be in very high demand for use in Australia's phosphate-poor soils.

In 1907, having reconstituted themselves with German board members, the Pacific Phosphate Company began mining on Nauru. Mining was labour intensive and indentured labourers were brought in from the surrounding islands and China. The mineral rich deposits — a combination of fossilised marine life and bird droppings — had to be chipped away from the coral-limestone rock that forms the central plateau region, leaving behind limestone pillars — *Pinnacles* — which are now a feature of the interior.



Pinnacles Photo: Matthieu Paley

After WWI Germany lost its Pacific territories and Nauru was managed by a joint British, Australian and New Zealand commission, the British Phosphate Commission.

During WWII the island was occupied by the Japanese, who deported most of the Nauruans

(1200) as labourers to Japanese naval headquarters at Truk Island.



Nauru Island attacked by Liberator bombers of the Seventh Air Force (circa 1943)
Credit: Philip A. Crawl and Edmund G. Love

In 1945 the Japanese surrendered to the Australian Navy and in 1946 the remaining 737 Nauruans were repatriated back. After WWII the UN established a trusteeship with Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain to govern Nauru, which continued the business of the Phosphate Commission. The British offered to re-settle the Nauruans, who turned down the offer, opting for self-determination.



British Phosphate Commission 5 Years Stamp 1975

In 1967 the Nauruans purchased the assets of the British Phosphate Commission. In 1968 Nauru was granted independence, and in 1970 control of the British Phosphate Commission passed over to the newly established Nauru Phosphate Corporation.



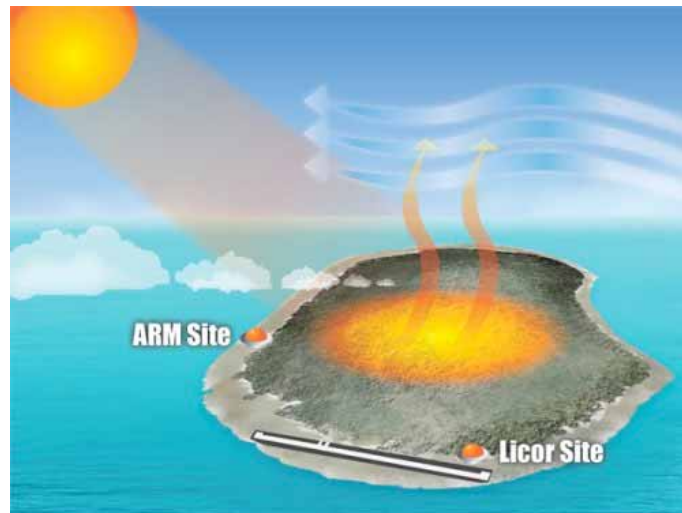
Nauru Phosphate Corporation 5 Years Stamp 1975

During the 1970s Nauru had one of the highest per capita incomes in the world, however the Nauruans invested badly, were poorly advised, and after mineral prices crashed during the 1990s recession, the country went bankrupt. By this time the island was mined of almost all of its phosphate, leaving 80 percent of the island barren and uninhabitable.



Torsten Blackwood/AFP/Getty Images

In 1989 Nauru took Australia to court in the International Court of Justice over actions during its administration, in particular its failure to remedy against phosphate mining, with Australia agreeing to an out-of-court settlement of 2.5 million Australian dollars annually for 20 years.



The heating of Nauru's interior and formation of cumulus 'cloud streets'.
Credit: Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, US Department of Energy.

The mining of phosphate has had ecological consequences, transforming the once lush rainforest region into a barren landscape of coral-limestone pinnacles and canyons. The loss of vegetation in the interior has led to increased temperatures, which fail to produce rainclouds leading to frequent droughts.

Change in soil and vegetation, alongside colonisation and trade, have had a significant social impact on locals, who are no longer able to produce their own food. Nauruans are now forced to import nearly all of their food — including drinking water — which is otherwise only available via one reportedly unreliable desalination plant.



World diabetes day billboard, Nauru. Photo: Tony Wheeler

According to a recent World Health Organisation report these circumstances have given rise to Nauruans suffering 'the worst health conditions in the Pacific region' (Takaaki, 2012), such as high rates of obesity due to a diet of imported, processed food, a corresponding high rate of diabetes (roughly 20% of the population) and heart disease. According to a 2007 study, the average life expectancy for a Nauruan is only 49 years for men and 55 for women (Miller, 2013).

The unemployment rate in Nauru is close to 90%.

EATING NAURU

Forces of colonialism, resource extraction, global migration, international finance, weather patterns and climate change all convene on Nauru. Rising sea levels will inevitably see the island submerge, Atlantis-like, beneath the Pacific Ocean. As such, Nauru presents a curiously prescient 'Philosophers' Island', which can be approached as a series of ironies and conundrums (very broad generalisations to the point of caricature).



Credence Halstead, Nauru Rehabilitation Corporation.
Picture: Lyndon Mechielson, The Australian 2012.

Biological

On one extreme of this plane is an obese and diabetic Naruan with decreased life expectancy, living in a situation of total environmental degradation and wholly reliant on external resources. On the other extreme is an asylum seeker — perhaps fleeing a situation of impoverishment, underdevelopment and persecution — wholly dependent on the infrastructure of the detention camp, which is itself wholly reliant on external resources.

To make this contradiction even more extreme the asylum seeker undertakes a hunger strike — expressed as a desire for death, as a political ultimatum or something of both.

Territorial

The phosphates and nitrogen strip-mined from Nauru were used largely in Australia to develop croplands and pastures to support its burgeoning population. So we have quite literally a significant portion of Nauru absorbed into Australia and effectively eaten. In this process the capacity of the island to support (human) life is transported across to Australia (and NZ, UK). With rising sea levels in the Pacific Ocean, Nauru is often referred to as the 'canary in the mine' of global warming.

In this circumstance Nauru demands we confront notions of planetary death, and radical species extinction or transformation.

Economic and political

Historically, Australia was able to build and support its population in part due to the appropriation of Nauru's resources. The environmental rehabilitation program underway, also funded by Australia.

Since the 1990s the Naruan economy has been dependent on Australian aid, and is either grateful or obliged to accept the income and opportunities afforded by off-shore processing.

Speculative

It's not difficult to imagine a future scenario where Naruans may find themselves as citizens-without-a-state, claiming asylum as 'environmental refugees'?

'False Paradise' — are these current arrangements of vast amounts of funding for offshore detention a viable scenario for the long term?

We often hear reports of asylum seekers stating they would rather die trying to reach Australia by sea than stay put where they are, so there is no indication that the boats will stop. Can we understand this situation other than 'us' and 'them'?

What are the punitive effects of offshore detention — on asylums seekers, but also on ourselves as 'rights-bearing' citizens?

What are the consequences of Eating Nauru?



Peaceful Hunger Strike Nauru Detention Camp 8 Nov 2012
Photo: Clint Rawcliff Deidenang

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