CONFERENCE ON PLACE, POLITICS, PRIVILEGE
Thursday 16th and Friday 17th February, 2017
Victoria University City Convention Centre, 300 Flinders Street, Melbourne
A range of local and international presenters will discuss different understandings of place and belonging in the context of displacement, rupture and transformation characteristic of contemporary societies. The conference will focus on how prevailing privileges and power relations are challenged by new forms of resistance, solidarities and new possibilities for belonging.

Keynote: Dr Tony Birch
Working Beyond Privilege: Aboriginal authority, hospitality and connectivity?
Dr Tony Birch is the inaugural Bruce McGuinness Research Fellow at Monash’s J Mayne, Victoria University. He is an award-winning author of books and short stories, including The Promised licence for the 2014 Victorian Premier’s Literary Award. His most recent novel, Ghost River (2015) won the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for Indigenous Writing 2016. Tony will deliver the keynote address to conference participants on Thursday 16th February at 9:30am.

Public Lecture: Guy Rundle
Former editor of Arena Magazine, Guy Rundle will give a public lecture on Thursday 16th February at 6:00pm. Guy is currently correspondent-at-large for The Age and regular contributor to a wide range of publications in Australia and the United Kingdom. He is the author of several books and numerous essays on place, culture and contemporary politics in Australia and the US. His forthcoming book is Alter Native: The American Dream and the Australian Way.

See http://communitymidcity.com.au for more information about the full conference program for Place, Politics, Privilege. To register your interest please contact CIDRN@vu.edu.au

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Incarceration’s social consequences

On 30 June each year, Australia counts its prisoners. It’s a big number. The most recent publicly available figure is for 2015: 36,134. That number is a record. Never before has Australia had so many people behind bars. The 2016 figure eclipsed the previous record, set the year before, of 33,729. That in turn broke the record set twelve months earlier, of just over 30,000.

We are locking up more people than ever in our history, and the numbers continue to grow with terrible speed—some 7 per cent in twelve months.

Australia does not think of itself as a punitive nation. We think of ourselves as easy-going, fair, generous—maybe even a bit soft. But this is nonsense. We are a punitive people, and growing more so. Our incarceration rate in 2015 was 136 prisoners per 100,000 of population. That was also a record. Not since Federation has such a high proportion of Australians been in jail. It is a higher rate than that in the United Kingdom, and more than twice as high as that in France or Germany.

The only First World nation with significantly higher rates of imprisonment is the United States, and that is on a planet of its own. The imprisonment rate there is just under 780 per 100,000 of population. The United States has 5 per cent of the world’s total population but 25 per cent of the world’s prisoners. There are 2.3 million prisoners in the United States.

You might say this is not relevant—that Australia is different. Well, we are, but decreasingly so.

Traditionally, Australia looked to British models of policing and criminal justice. This was a matter of pride in conservative circles. But, perhaps under the influence of American popular culture, that is changing. The police services in every state and territory are now routinely armed, with a wider range of more visible weapons belted to uniforms increasing military in style.

Political parties are more willing than ever before to pursue populist ‘tough on crime’ policies such as mandatory sentences for certain offences. In my home state, Victoria, the opposition leader, Matthew Guy, responded to a rise in reported rates of crime (which was real, but complex and multifaceted, as crime data always is) by saying that the state was experiencing a ‘crime tsunami’.

‘I’ve never felt more unsafe from my 42 years living in this state than I do today,’ he said. ‘My wife and I check every door, every window at night and I know I’m not alone—all my neighbours are the same.’ The notion that suburban Melbourne is somehow under siege is ridiculous, but continually repeated on commercial television news and in the Murdoch press. It comes to be believed, as does the perceived need to ‘get tough’.

“The law and order system is broken and needs extensive changes... There still remain massive problems with frontline police numbers, weak bail laws, soft sentences, and parole laws that need to be further toughened...”[There is a] crisis in our prison system where there is a flood of drugs and weapons, increased escapes, prisoners rioting and “striking” because they don’t like the conditions.” That was Mr. Guy again, but the rhetoric is similar in every jurisdiction.

And its origins is the bare-knuckle arena of American politics. The current president-elect, Donald Trump, on the death penalty: Civilized people don’t put up with barbaric behaviour. Would it have been civilized to put Hitler in prison? No—it would have been an affront to civilization. The same is true of criminals who prey on innocent people. They have declared war on civilization. I don’t care if the victim is a CEO or a floor sweep. A life is a life, and if you criminally take an innocent life you’d better be prepared to forfeit your own. My only complaint is that lethal injection is too comfortable a way to go. [Trump’s reference to Hitler is deeply ironic: see the box below.]

No, you won’t hear that from an Australian politician, but that Trump can articulate all that he has and still be successful will embed the ambitious and reactionary elements of conservative politics to push for more populist punitive measures.

A look at the past ten years shows how much social damage this can do.

Since 2005, Australia’s prison population, which was already high, has soared. In 2005, there were 23,634 male prisoners. In 2015, there were 33,256—an increase of 41 per cent.
Over the same period, the number of women in prison increased by 66 per cent, though from a much lower base. Ancient records of every government in Australia has a policy of avoiding sending Indigenous people to prison, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women over the past decade, despite from 5555 to 9882, an increase of 75 per cent.

Crime is mostly a boy thing. While the number of female prisoners rises every year, both in absolute numbers and proportionally, 92 per cent of Australian prisoners are male. This is typical of most societies. Men, especially young men, commit more crime. Also typical of most societies is that people start offending seriously in their late teens, and this comes to a head in their early twenties. Rates of imprisonment are, consequently, highest for men in their late twenties and early thirties. For men aged thirty to thirty-four, for example, the rate of imprisonment is 685 per 100,000.

However, men are more likely to be in jail. Men in their late twenties and early thirties are more likely to be in jail. The rates are high because Australia sends far more people to jail, per head of population, than do most other countries. But there is an elephant in the room.

The rate of imprisonment for all Australian men is 366 per 100,000, whereas for women it is only 16 per 100,000. The rate of imprisonment for all Australian women is 31. The rate for Indigenous women is 147.

What this means is that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in Australia today is almost sixteen times more likely to be in prison than a non-Indigenous Australian. It is the problem everywhere but worst in Western Australia. The Northern Territory, where conditions in the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre have recently been exposed as scandalous, has a very high rate of imprisonment, and Indigenous imprisonment, but the Northern Territory has a small population: the problem of Indigenous offenders and imprisonment there is very real, but the raw numbers are relatively small. Western Australia’s overall imprisonment rate is very high compared to that of the rest of the nation: 278 per 100,000 of population. But the rate for non-Indigenous Western Australians, 184, is lower than for the nation as a whole. The explanation for this extraordinary difference? The rate of imprisonment for Indigenous Western Australians is 354 per 100,000 of population. One in twenty-eight Indigenous Western Australians is in jail.

Western Australia is extreme, but it is only a matter of degree. In New South Wales an Indigenous person is in prison for a crime three times as likely as a non-Indigenous person, and four times as likely as someone from the rest of the population. In Victoria the ratio is twelve; in Queensland, thirteen; in South Australia, sixteen. Even though Indigenous people represent less than 1 per cent of the population of Australia, they account for 27 per cent of prisoners. Of our huge prison population—36,634—an appalling 9885 are Indigenous. If has happened already, the figure will soon top 10,000.

Just as for the wider population, Indigenous prisoners are more likely to be male, and more likely to be in their twenties and thirties. For these men, the rates of imprisonment are almost beyond comprehension. For the age group twenty to twenty-four, the rate is 7351 per 100,000. The number is so big that many doctors are more concerned about these young Indigenous men aged twenty to twenty-four in jail and it gets worse for the age group twenty-five to twenty-nine, the rate is 7,232 per 100,000. For thirty to thirty-five, it is 6.8 per cent. That’s one in every fifteen men.

There are only two possible explanations for the huge numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in prison.

The rate of imprisonment for Indigenous Western Australians is 362 per 100,000 of population. One in twenty-eight Indigenous Western Australians is in jail.

The first is that our criminal-justice system is racist—and rightly so. Indigenous people, in this view, are just bad—roughly twenty times as bad as the non-Indigenous population. Aboriginal people need to do to keep out of jail is to stop committing crime. It’s their fault. The law is the same for everyone, and if Indigenous Australians keep committing crime and going to jail, that just shows how bad they are. This is not an argument you will ever hear from a mainstream politician or a police, the only idea that is out is that you’re a bad person. We should get back to the facts. It is almost that unassailable form of knowledge: ‘common sense’.

But it isn’t true. There isn’t a lot that you can prove in criminology. In fact, a lot of crime and offending time is hard to believe, pin down, compare with simple statements about. But this is one thing that is absolutely clear. The belief that putting people in prison will ‘scare them straight’ is false. They come out worse, more damaged, more likely to commit crime, and those crimes are likely to be more violent.

Of Australia’s 26,724 prisoners, 58 per cent—nearly 24,000—have already served at least one term of prison before the offence that has landed
Self-immolation
Tim Robertson

Tibetans’ refusal to live under circumstances prescribed from above

Wherever there is oppression, there is resistance.

Mao Zedong

For all the book’s flaws, Albert Camus’ Myth of Sisyphus remains one of the best encapsulations of what it means to engage in political struggle. Faced with an apparently insurmountable diversity, in Camus’ meaningless world the only answer is to make one’s resistence’s raison d’être. How, then, does one square the injunction to imagine Sisyphus’ joy with the almost certain death of those Tibetans who, in protesting Chinese rule, self-immolate?

In a recently published book, Tibet on Fire, post, essayist, blogger and leading Tibetan dissident Tsering Woenser challenges many of the assumptions Camus communicated in his book. In the same way that the book provides a number of challenges in terms of thinking about direct action within tightly constrained ethical and moral boundaries (but more on that later).

First, it’s important to understand what the wave of self-immolations since the 2008 Beijing Olympics have grown out of because, contrary to what many assume, there is no tradition of self-immolation in Tibetan culture. Woenser makes the point that, instead of viewing self-immolations as individual acts, they should be viewed as part of a broader collective resistance. They are a continuation of the popular protests that erupted in March 2008; since then, around 145 Tibetans have set themselves on fire.

The Chinese Communist Party has depicted these protests as the work of ‘terrorists’ and ‘separatists’ carrying on orders from the Dalai Lama; in reality, Tibetans were simply responding to decades of occupation and persecution. The protests began peacefully in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, before spreading throughout the Tibetan Plateau. On 10 March, Tibetans gathered to commemorate Uprising Day, which marks the anniversary of their 1959 uprising against the Communist Party. It’s a day of great national pride (thereby betraying the Dalai Lama) pride, but it’s also imbued with a profound sense of sadness and loss, since it was this event that drove the Dalai Lama into exile, from which he’s never returned.

Led by the monks, grass shaving festivals marched through the streets of Lhasa and occupied public places. The Chinese security forces were cautious—aware that, with the Beijing Olympics just around the corner, the world was watching a little more closely. In China the

If one is serious about bringing about change, it means rescuing and reinventing the revolutionary power of religion.