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Gregory Melleuish

Excerpt

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CHAPTER 1

*Introduction: Culture, Tradition
and Modernity***Modernity and Post-Modernity**

All historians write within a particular present. As such, they are granted certain insights but denied others which those writing in future ages will see with clarity. In an investigation such as the one which this study sets itself – the elaboration and analysis of a specific tradition of thought and action – it is useful to attempt to establish both the particular present and its relationship to the topic under review. In this way the precise contribution of this study to Australian cultural and intellectual history, both at the empirical and the methodological levels, can be established. The approach of the Introduction is fundamentally Socratic; by discussing and criticising existing approaches to Australian cultural and intellectual history it can establish its own approach to this field of learning.

The most appropriate way to consider this relationship is first to state the topic of the study and then the nature of the particular present. The study deals with a particular tradition of thought in Australia as it developed during what may be described as the period of ‘modern Australia’. (Modern Australia may be used as a term to cover that period of Australian history inaugurated by Federation and which came to an end in the 1960s.) This tradition, which was developed in the main, by university educated intellectuals during the period *c.* 1880–1960, is summed up most aptly by the term ‘Cultural Liberalism’. It covered a range of concerns, from political and social matters to general cultural issues, and it possessed a powerful religious dimension. The central ambition of its adherents was to maintain the spiritual and intellectual integrity of the individual while at the same time providing the basis for a rational and humane social order.

The particular present is that of post-modernity in which many of the ideals of the tradition which we seek to explore have been scorned or

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rejected. Significantly one aspect of post-modernity has been the assertion that we live in a 'post-humanist' age.¹ More generally, as we shall see, one of the most important features of the adherents of post-modernity is the tendency to emphasise discontinuity, plurality and uncertainty or, as Richard Rorty sums it up, 'contingency and irony'.² This is complemented by attempts to dissolve or 'deconstruct' all fixed and certain positions.³

Whatever may be one's attitude to some of the more dubious aspects of post-modernity, the power of many of its arguments should be recognised and the challenge that it poses cannot be ignored. Nowhere is this need stronger than in the study of Australian cultural and intellectual history. Traditionally this has been a relatively underdeveloped field of intellectual enquiry.⁴ Moreover, the association of intellectual and cultural history is by no means uncontroversial. There is a battle raging in Australia as to the meaning of culture, a debate with which this study must engage. Before the framework necessary for our needs can be constructed we must first try to understand how ideas about the development of Australian culture have changed during the past forty years as modern Australia has given way to post-modern Australia.

This task may be carried out most economically by first examining the radical nationalist conception of Australian culture which was the key expression of culture in modern Australia. Then it will be possible to consider the somewhat anarchic situation which has arisen in the wake of the sustained attack launched on that ideal of culture during the 1970s and 1980s.

Australian Culture: Radical Nationalism and its Aftermath

Although radical nationalism had existed in Australia since at least the 1890s, it is true to say that it was given its ripest expression in the 1950s with such works as Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* and Vance Palmer's *The Legend of the Nineties*. There is a great irony in the fact that these mature expressions of Australianism occurred at the very moment when post-war immigration was transforming the culture they purported to describe. Both works look back to an Australia which, whatever its virtues and vices, was to die slowly over the next thirty years as the policies which had maintained it, from 'White Australia' to economic and financial regulation, were dismantled.

Palmer's *The Legend of the Nineties* may be taken as a fair representative of this genre. It is a work in which the need to demonstrate the growth of a unique Australian culture is balanced by a despair that that culture has degenerated since the golden days of the 1890s. In a sense, for Palmer 'legend' plays a similar role as 'myth' did for Georges Sorel – as

that which motivates people to participate actively in the life of their community (or, as in the case of Sorel, make a revolution).⁵ Palmer was nothing if not a vitalist. He had been profoundly influenced by Hilaire Belloc's *The Servile State* and came to see the National Culture as some sort of vital animating principle fighting the modern tendency towards servility.⁶ For Palmer, culture did not mean the actual way in which people lived their lives but the ideal of activity which inspired them to break the chains of servility.

Palmer believed that Australian culture existed in the ideal sense as the legacy of a decade in which 'a scattered people . . . had a sudden vision of themselves as a nation with a character of their own and a historic role to play, and this vision set fruitful creative forces in motion'.⁷

In effect, the 1890s had given expression to these creative forces, even if imperfectly and naively, so that they had established the true, living Australian culture. As Palmer put it, there was an 'intensity about the spirit of the early nineties that created images and ideas having a continuous force'.⁸

How did this Australian culture come to be? For Palmer it was the culmination of an evolutionary process through which migrants coming to Australia had grown into harmony with the soil. Although his position is not stated explicitly, Palmer was of the school which believed that Australian cultural development had passed through the evolutionary stages common to all cultures.⁹ He described a group of people isolated from the rest of the world, and placed in an environment which set to work moulding their characters: 'the people beyond the coastal ranges . . . had a common face, for the same influences, physical and spiritual, had been at work on them for nearly half a century'.¹⁰ Palmer owed a debt to nineteenth century evolutionary thought, in particular to Lamarck's theory of acquired characteristics and Tylor's anthropological model of the stages of social growth.¹¹ The anthropological influence becomes especially strong in the following chapter, 'Myth-making', in which Palmer contended that: 'It has been said that men cannot feel really at home in any environment until they have transformed the natural shapes around them by infusing them with myth'.¹²

Palmer's evolutionary model of Australian cultural development (by which he meant white European development) proceeded as follows. Firstly, the people were brought into the Australian environment which then began to mould and shape them. The race evolved in its own peculiar way: 'three or four generations of life under semi-tropical suns had coloured his [the Australian's] skin with protective pigment'.¹³ Like any people they developed myths and expressed them in the traditional forms of the ballad and the song. Out of this earlier myth-making emerged a national ideal which Palmer described as 'the dream of a

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self-contained country, secure from the outer world, developing its own resources, and gradually building up a society that would be a pattern for free men everywhere'.¹⁴

This ideal found its expression in Utopianism and the flourishing of literary activity but came into conflict with reality. This led to compromise and the eventual fading of the dream, leaving behind the Legend as an inspiration for future generations. In Palmer's scheme there was also a belief in the idea of the 'saving remnant', of a fragment of the pure white race living in isolation from the world preserving democracy for the world. A similar belief was expressed in P.R. Stephensen's *The Foundations of Culture in Australia*. This vision of Australia as the last bastion of European civilisation in a world of strife and decay reflects the crisis through which both Palmer and Stephensen lived. Australian culture could be made to seem a beacon of light in an age of gathering darkness.¹⁵

The major problem with Palmer's model is that it will not bear the weight of the facts it seeks to explain. There is a quaint charm in his attempt to construct an Australian national ideal using scaffolding derived from out-dated nineteenth century anthropological and historical ideas. (The model is also exceedingly Eurocentric.) At most, it is what Palmer called it – a legend, a myth: not entirely false, but then also, not substantially true. This is not to accuse Palmer of ignoble motives – far from it. Palmer's desire was to create a more alive and vital culture in a disappointing and disheartening era.

One can reject much of Palmer's argument and yet concede the basic point: that something which can be termed Australian national culture did come into being during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Palmer's real problem was that he claimed too much. He placed the development of Australian culture on a single track using a dubious model. But the incorrectness of the details of Palmer's analysis does not necessarily contradict the appropriateness of the two key elements of Palmer's position: national culture and evolution. Rather, it is a matter of examining more closely what is to be understood by these two terms.

Palmer's conception of national culture also illustrates some of the fundamental contradictions in the ideas and beliefs held by the intellectuals of modern Australia. On the one hand there was a desire to build a more rational social order, on the other hand there was the recognition that this social order was essentially servile and crushed individual autonomy. The source of this contradiction can be traced to a conception of evolution as a controlled and unswerving process as opposed to a spontaneous and unplanned operation created by individuals. Palmer's vision of national development had strong religious foundations and his picture of nationalism was that of a quasi-religious force being frustrated by the power of

the world. In this view evolution takes on a strong element of necessity; for all his vitalist pretensions, Palmer did not provide the individual with much scope for influencing the culture.

Unfortunately, the growing disenchantment with radical nationalism which has occurred over the past twenty years has discredited not only the particular version of nationalism and culture advocated by Palmer but has also brought into question the very value of nationalism itself. The old Australian national ideas have been decried as racist, sexist and destructive of individual expression; and there is some truth in these accusations.¹⁶ But, as Palmer rightly argued, there was also a genuine idealism.

The growing tendency to emphasise the negative aspects of the old Australian cultural ideals is related to a fundamental change amongst those who articulate the values of Australian culture. Those values, and the ideals they embody, no longer seem as compelling as they once were. Having lost their natural, inevitable quality they now appear as things arbitrary and contingent. The old evolutionary view of culture regarded the coming together of the spirit of place and the Australian people as a natural process. The historicist attack on culture has called this naturalistic idea of culture into question.

Once culture is no longer viewed as something natural and normal but as arbitrary and contingent it is not a drastic step to consider it, not as a growth but as a fiction, an artificial invention imposed on Australians by those pursuing ignoble ends. According to this view, culture and national identity do not have their roots in the real concerns of men and women but in the desire by certain groups and classes to maintain their dominance over the population at large. Culture is conceived of as a tool of domination in the hands of the few; a means of perpetuating social disunity and inequality by creating the illusion that equality and social harmony have been achieved. This can only be the case if culture is considered as something 'invented' or 'fictional', as something imposed on, rather than growing out of, the needs of the people.¹⁷

The foundation of this conception of culture is the idea that human beings are consumers whose needs are manipulated by those who wish to make a profit out of them. It is interesting to note that for the Servile State school of social criticism, amongst which Palmer should be counted, culture was advocated as part of an active 'production' mentality in opposition to the passive consumer mentality induced by the Servile State.¹⁸ For the writers of the 1970s and 1980s culture can be understood only in terms of consumption. Drawing on the writings of Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci they came to view culture as something produced by the state in order to make people think in a certain way.¹⁹ A corollary of this view is that if the state can be 'captured' by a group of people then it should be possible to break the hegemony of

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one culture and replace it by that of another. Such is the thinking, for example, behind Donald Horne's espousal of the 'clever country'.²⁰

For Palmer, culture was a living positive thing, created by people to give reality to their lives. For his successors, culture is much more insubstantial, a thing which can be imposed on people by the state at will. The principal effect of this change was a devaluation of culture to something transitory, a thing waiting to be replaced by something new and better. Part of this is to be explained by the fact that a genuine discontinuity does exist between the 'culture' of Palmer and that experienced by the writers of the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed it is a central argument of this study that in calling his work *The End of Modernity*, James McAuley was bringing an era to an end – the era of modern Australia and, more generally, the era of humanism and culture.

Writing in 1974, John Docker viewed the intellectual and cultural traditions of Sydney and Melbourne not as living realities with which to argue but as things of the past to be cast off as burdens.²¹ Four years later, Tim Rowse's *Australian Liberalism and National Character* attempted to demonstrate that many of the fundamental ideas held by Australian intellectuals could be reduced to a 'liberal ideology'.²² Hence the world of ideas created in Australia could be condemned firstly as out-of-date and secondly as 'mere ideology'. In other words, Docker and Rowse recovered many of the basic important ideas of Australian intellectual life only to consign them safely to 'history', thereby demonstrating their irrelevance for the contemporary world. The growing emphasis on discontinuity in cultural analysis had its origins in a genuine feeling that a real discontinuity had taken place in the development of Australian culture. Something had broken what had earlier been perceived as the calm evolutionary flow of Australian development.

While the evolutionary nationalists had emphasised continuity, growth and unity, the new school of the 1970s and 1980s saw discontinuity, contingency, plurality and artificiality as the keys to understanding Australian culture. One immediate consequence of this position is that a distance grows up between the cultural analyst and the culture which he or she seeks to examine. The culture is reduced to data, or a series of texts, to be dealt with through the application of 'theory' – it is no longer a living bundle of ideas with which the interrogator holds a conversation.²³ But from where, it may be asked, does this 'theory' come? Why should it be considered relevant or true?

This is a serious question and can only be answered by examining the central ideas of the most popular of these works of recent cultural criticism, Richard White's *Inventing Australia*. The basis of White's argument is simple: there is no 'real' Australia as it really was.

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A sense of national identity does not emerge out of the real concerns and interests of ordinary men and women; it is an 'invention' which is 'made' rather than 'grown'. It is 'artificially imposed' from without rather than from within. As it is invented so it cannot be real. Consequently, ideas concerning the 'essential Australia' are 'all intellectual constructs, neat, tidy, comprehensible – and necessarily false'. He provided no argument as to why invention and intellectual construction necessarily imply falsehood (the addition of the word 'necessarily' implies that he believes his argument to have logical force, that is, all attempts to make intellectual statements about the essential Australia are false by definition). For White, however, the crucial issue was not whether such ideas are true or false 'but what their function is'.

White isolated three main forces in explaining the function of national ideals in Australia:

- 1 modern ideas about nationality and the intellectual fashions underlying those ideas;
- 2 the role of the intelligentsia in propagating those national ideals;
- 3 the role of those groups who wield economic power.²⁴

The general thrust is that intellectuals create those ideas which establish the hegemony or cultural dominance of those holding the economic power.

Two points are worth making. Firstly, this picture of the intelligentsia seriously underestimates the autonomy of this group and their capacity to pursue their own interests. It also masks the desire of many intellectuals to hold the reins of power in their own right. Secondly, White's three forces can be used to explain the success of his own ideas as follows: contemporary intellectual fashions plus an intelligentsia seeking bureaucratic and academic power plus the need for certain economic groups to create a more internationally oriented outlook in the 1980s led to an acceptance of White's own position.

Does this mean that White's position is therefore 'artificially imposed' and 'necessarily false'? *Inventing Australia* is, after all, an 'intellectual construct'. Unless White can establish that his work is in a different logical category to other works about Australian national identity (which he does not) then the only possible conclusion is that *Inventing Australia* is a false invention which nevertheless makes claims about Australian nationalism which it wants its readers to believe are true. The real problem facing White is that in his obsession with function he cannot distinguish between true and false statements. Why should intellectual constructs imply falsity?

At a philosophical level White's argument simply lacks coherence. He is better considered as employing a rhetorical strategy to outflank his evolutionary predecessors. Whereas they used the rhetoric of organic nature, White sought to undermine them by employing the rhetoric of the machine. By using words such as 'invention' and 'artificial' he made use of traditional distinctions between nature and artifice. Rhetorically this has value as it implies that nationalism is an historical entity rather than something inherent in human nature. But does the revelation of this historicity render nationalism 'false'? Here the limits of the nature/artifice *topos* are reached because it is a rhetorical and not a real distinction.

Invention, for example, can be considered to be a perfectly 'natural' human action. Take the case of science. Modern science is an historical creation. It could not have come into being until certain 'intellectual constructs' were 'invented'. These constructs included such ideas as law and the capacity to translate natural phenomena into mathematical terms.²⁵ But the 'invention' of science in no way implies that its discoveries are false; indeed, science has been remarkably successful in discovering real knowledge about the world. Scientific method does not depend for its success on the historical circumstances which brought it into the world.

Scientific discoveries are not plucked out of thin air; they cannot come into existence without past ideas and discoveries. The same is true of any invention. They are not the artificial or arbitrary creations of some hallucinated imagination but the end products of long involved processes. Historical development is not without some sort of logical structure in that journeys taken in the past help to direct us into our present and future paths. Ernest Gellner sums up this position succinctly: 'Food production, political centralisation, the division of labour, literacy, science, intellectual liberalisation, appear in a certain historic sequence. They do so because some at least of the later developments in human history seem to presuppose the earlier ones, and could not have preceded them.'²⁶

Equally, it should be pointed out that the ascription of an idea or an invention to a particular group does not imply that that invention will provide benefits only for that group. It may help or it may harm other groups and individuals. The development of professional scientific medicine certainly did nothing for traditional healers but it provided more than a few benefits for the sick. Certain conclusions can be drawn. Invention is not something 'artificial' but a perfectly natural human activity rendered necessary by changing circumstances. It builds on existing traditions of thought and action. Intellectual constructs are necessarily neither true nor false. Only empirical investigation can establish

their truth or falsehood. For example, the triumph of Newtonian physics and the failure of Cartesian physics can be viewed in these terms.

The situation is less clear-cut in the case of something nebulous such as 'National Character' but a similar rule applies. If someone attempted to portray Australians as drawing-room dandies who spent their days in sloth and indolence then such a portrait would be false and unable to win public support. A similar doubt hangs over Donald Horne's attempt to reconstruct Australia as the 'clever country'. Granted that there are competing visions of Australian national identity, then there is a 'real' Australia which limits the number of possible competitors. If such a 'real' Australia did not exist then it would be possible to concoct any national image and impose it. But a cursory examination of White's national images demonstrates that they are all quite similar; indeed, it is possible to read *Inventing Australia* as the evolution of ideas about Australian national identity. The fact of competing national images does not preclude the existence of a 'real Australia as it really was'.

There are serious flaws in any approach to cultural history which emphasises discontinuity, contingency and the rhetoric of invention. Quite simply it collapses into incoherence; the evidence contradicts its pre-suppositions. It is best understood as a reaction to the old idea of the evolution of the nation as a monolithic entity. Clearly the Palmer picture of a single culture evolving through a pre-determined series of stages cannot do justice to the cultural variety of Australian life. But an escape from the rigid confines of the radical nationalist model need not condemn us to some sort of mad mosaic in which fleeting images jostle each other for the attention of the consumer.

Hence, after considering both the nationalist model of cultural development and the post-modern attempts to discredit it, one is left with a profound sense of dissatisfaction. What exactly can be salvaged? Any cultural history will need to preserve the following elements. The first of these is a need to understand and appreciate continuity in the sense that ideas do not spring out of nowhere. The 'presence of the past' permeates any culture.²⁷ The second is a clear understanding of the meaning of culture, and the third an awareness of the diversity and complexity of human culture. Any 'culture' is, in fact, the product of a variety of cultural traditions in which individuals participate in their day-to-day lives. Every individual participates in many institutions – family, church, work, nation, voluntary organisations, political parties, etc. – which have their own norms and ideals. Blinded by notions of 'hegemony', writers like White want to ascribe primacy to a single institution – the state – and so make national identity the dominant and basic element of culture. The real world is much more complex than this. The importance of the nation and national identity cannot be denied but the significance of

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other cultures also needs to be recognised. The easiest way to do this is to consider the national culture as constituting one tradition amongst a large number of other traditions.

Another major problem with the White style of cultural analysis is that it divides human beings into two groups: those who, like White, are enlightened and can see that culture is merely an invention, and a great mass of manipulated fools. But why should anyone assume that the pre-occupations of the majority of human beings are mindless and foolish?

Really, we are here dealing with two conceptions of culture: one which emphasises the inherent intelligence and rationality of purposeful human activity and one which views human activity as passive and acquiscent, the product of whim and fancy. Alain Finkielkraut has summed up the distinction neatly: 'In effect the term "culture" now has two meanings. The first asserts the pre-eminence of the life of thought; the second denies this: from everyday gestures to the great creations of the human spirit, is not everything culture?'²⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre has shown that this second conception of culture can be traced back to the eighteenth century philosopher, David Hume. For Hume, he contends, 'Philosophy is a delightful avocation for those whose talents and tastes happen to be of the requisite kind, just as hunting is a delightful avocation for those whose talents and tastes are of *that* kind.'²⁹

The roots of the relativism espoused by such post-modern philosophers as Richard Rorty can be traced back to Hume.³⁰ The distinction between culture as purposeful activity and culture as delightful avocation should not be confused with that between high and popular culture. High culture can surrender to the temptation of 'delightful avocations' just as popular culture, properly understood, is rooted in the belief that certain actions and forms of behaviour are superior to others. Indeed, John Carroll has recently argued that popular culture is much more able to understand and portray fundamental truths than high culture.³¹

Philosophically there is no distinction between high and popular culture. Empirically the division does exist but it is less important than that which exists between culture as a living force and culture as passive consumption. (In recycling 'French theory' high culture follows the model of consumer capitalism.) One possible move is to salvage the valuable elements in both the Palmer and the White positions. Palmer is fundamentally correct in pointing to a vital, living idea of culture as that which stirs the active intellect. White has probed behind the facade of Palmer's national culture to reveal its true nature as a patchwork quilt of images and ideals.

White's arguments do not deny the idea that there is an Australian culture but it is not a culture in the radical nationalist sense. Rather, Australian culture at any particular point of time is the sum of those