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Peter Nicholson

The 'Devil' in Haiti

Aurélien Mondon

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The 'Devil' in Haiti

Aurélien Mondon

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Victims of colonialist exploitation for centuries, Haitians need more than temporary aid

A few days after the earthquake, Pat Robertson, a sexist, racist, homophobic American preacher, declared Haitians themselves were to blame for the disaster as they had sworn 'a pact to [sic] the Devil'. Sometimes it is hard not to believe that the 'Devil' has played a role in Haiti's plight. However, no pact was ever sworn. If hell was unleashed on Haiti on 12 January, colonialism and neo-colonialism had a great deal to do with it. Hell has been Haitians' path to freedom ever since its desire for emancipation was first quashed over two centuries ago.

Any country would have suffered from such a terrible earthquake. Even in Australia people would have died; however, it is unlikely that the death toll would have been anywhere near that of 12 January. Many journalists have implied that Haiti had failed to rise up to the challenge of modernity as, for example, their Dominican neighbours had. This argument tends to make us feel better as it reinforces a common underlying racism as to the impossibility of 'blacks' ever being able to free themselves from poverty and civil war.

But as many cases around the world have shown, it is not lack of skills, lack of democratic spirit or any absence of a wish for a just society that has led to many third world countries remaining for decades on the brink of extreme poverty. It is not, as French President Nicolas Sarkozy declared in 'historico-political consideration' of the 'African man', that the Haitians have not 'entered history enough', that their 'mindset does not leave space for human adventure or for the idea of progress'.

Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo and other third world countries have strived for real emancipatory freedom, starting with freedom from their colonial past and present. If many have failed, their human skills cannot be blamed. Amazing emancipatory movements and leaders have risen throughout the history of such countries. People such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba and, more recently, Jean-Bertrand Aristide have all

fought and suffered alongside the poor to bring an end to centuries of exploitation. These democratic movements were not marginal, and despite the bloody repression exercised by dictatorial puppets serving powerful Western interests, a vast majority of people supported them. At times, their struggle seemed almost successful, and none more than the Haitian case.

By the end of the 18th century, Haiti was the world's most profitable colony, generating revenues higher than the thirteen North American colonies put together. After the French Revolution, Haitian slaves organised a revolt and for over a decade fought the French, the British and Spanish, with tens of thousands of European soldiers losing their lives in battle. In 1804, Haiti became the second independent country in the Americas and the site of the first successful slave revolt of all time. Most importantly, Haiti represented the only complete emancipatory revolution. For the first time, human rights were applied to all, without distinction. This victory was a symbolic blow to white supremacy and it was soon clear that Haiti would pay dearly for such a universal claim of equality. So as not to let Haiti become an example, colonial powers made sure the small war-ravaged country would never be seen for what it truly was: a beacon of freedom for all the oppressed peoples of the earth.

Anticipating further assaults from colonial powers, Haiti devoted most of its resources to the building of fortresses, preventing in turn the reconstruction of the country. The nation was further crippled by economic retaliation; it was not until 1825 that France agreed to acknowledge Haiti's independence and renew commercial ties, but only once Haiti had agreed to reimburse the French for stolen property. The Haitians had stolen slaves; that is, they had stolen themselves—their freedom had become a mere commodity. The bill came to 150 million francs, roughly the annual budget of France at the time. While France agreed to reduce it to 90 million, the interest

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on the debt and on the loans contracted in Europe used up most of the Haitian budget until the last repayment in 1947. It has been estimated that today the French owe Haiti up to \$US21 billion dollars. In the meantime, Haiti was invaded. In 1915, and for over twenty years, the United States installed a deregulated economy and strengthened the power of the military; publicly, they 'democratised' the country. Officially, 99.2 per cent of the Haitian population welcomed the occupation; when the United States left, up to 30,000 Haitians had lost their lives.

After the 1937 exit, Haitian army generals staged a series of coups until François Duvalier ('Papa Doc') took power and installed an extremely violent, anti-communist regime with the tacit support of the United States. His son took over in 1971, receiving increasingly fervent support from the United States for his deregulation of the economy. 'Baby Doc' became yet another caricature of a puppet dictator, accumulating for his country a massive debt whilst amassing an immense personal fortune. The violence of the new regime eventually provoked its fall as the people rose once more to fight for their freedom. Duvalier was forced into exile in 1986, retiring comfortably to the French Riviera.

As the generals were not able to quash the popular movement, elections were organised in 1990. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a priest who had dedicated his life to empowering the poor majority, was elected in the first round by 67 per cent of the vote. In a powerful and symbolic action, his government demobilised the army and conducted a series of progressive reforms. However, only seven months into his presidency, Aristide was ousted by former military generals, supported by the elite and partly financed by the CIA. Protests against the coup were quashed and hundreds, if not thousands, of Aristide's supporters were hunted down and killed. Yet, the people stood with Aristide and even encouraged the US embargo. George Bush Senior showed his support in favour of the coup when he lifted the embargo (allowing important income to flow into the hands of the rebels) and forcibly sent Haitian refugees back to their country. The Clinton administration eventually reinstated Aristide, only at the price of painful and unjust concessions: amongst others, the coup perpetrators were given amnesties and offered key positions in government. Aristide's reluctance was described by the United States as intractable and rigid: the elected President began to be portrayed as a proto-dictator.

However, it was clear that Aristide's popularity could not be diminished; in the 2000 elections, judged legitimate by the United Nations, the priest was re-elected by



over 90 per cent of the vote. 'Proper democracy' was therefore imposed by international bodies. Notably, the IMF imposed drastic deregulatory measures on Haiti. Aristide had no choice but to accept most, as 70 per cent of his country's operating budget came from international aid. As the result of decades of deregulation, Haiti was no longer self-sufficient in rice and sugar and imported most of these 'commodities' from subsidised US farmers. According to Oxfam, Haiti had become 'one of the most liberal trade regimes in the world'. Aristide did make some headway despite his powerful adversaries and the health and education systems were improved. In 2003, the United States decided to cut their aid to Haiti after the elite declared Aristide to have become too dictatorial. As the President was forced to make further concessions, the ultra-minority opposition demanded more. Their military wings organised violent attacks which eventually led to a UN 'intervention' headed by France and the United States. Aristide was ousted for the second time and exiled against his will. The UN declared that Aristide's withdrawal would help create 'a peaceful, democratic and locally owned future'.

Just before the 2008 hurricanes and the earthquake, the situation in Haiti was critical. The IMF reported that 55 per cent of the population lived on 44 US cents a day. One in twenty Haitians was HIV positive. Child mortality was four times higher than in Latin America or the rest of the Caribbean and more than a third of the population did not have access to safe drinking water. The media compounded this gloomy vision of Haiti as a failed country. It exploited our deepest neo-colonialist feelings and our darkest sense of white superiority, which makes us the patronising saviours of a doomed third world. Yet, as history has shown, Haitians fought many times over two centuries for a brighter future, not only for themselves, but for all those who were oppressed. They succeeded many times in overcoming the most inhumane conditions imposed upon them by the most powerful in this world. If help is necessary at this stage, what Haiti truly needs is to be free. As important players in this exploitative system, Haiti's lack of this basic human right is partly our responsibility. To think that our money will bring anything more than temporary (albeit much needed) relief entirely misses the point. **a**

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Even Though it All
Went Wrong

Stephen Minas

Stephen Minas covered the Copenhagen summit for Radio Television Hong Kong and *The Diplomat* magazine. His blog on climate change is at www.shanghai greengang.wordpress.com.

Could it all collapse after the Copenhagen fiasco?

'They've just started another round,' announced the European Union press flack at a quarter past eleven on the final night of the conference, explaining why the EU press conference had been 'postponed': 'They are still going through the text'—the world, that is, not the EU. The American president had already left, having trumpeted the merits of the deal now, apparently, unravelling. After two weeks of stop-start talks, walkouts, accusations and counteraccusations, at forty-five minutes to midnight, what else could go wrong?

The subsequent, rancorous hours came and went. Dawn crept up on the inmates of the Bella Centre's modernist twilight zone and with it, surely, recognition of how little had been accomplished and how much remained to do. After a marathon final session, in which the proposed text was likened to the Nazi Holocaust and Venezuela's delegate cut herself to make a point, the 'Copenhagen Accord' was merely 'noted' by the Conference. Consensus adoption of the text proved beyond those assembled, and when the summit finally broke up on Saturday morning the most that could be honestly said was that it had been rescued from total collapse. (UN Framework Convention head Yvo de Boer revealed in late January that he had subsequently written to all UNFCCC nations, asking them whether or not they support the Accord.)

In the weeks that followed, the 'Hopenhagen' props were quietly mothballed and Copenhagen reverted to its accustomed role as a pleasant Scandinavian capital. It is no longer a byword for the hopes of environmentalists and the suspicions of not a few conspiracy theorists (a status that was both apt, given its cleantech leading edge, and incongruous, given its size and distance from the centres of power). The city has been denied—or perhaps spared—the diplomatic immortality of Kyoto, Bretton Woods and Versailles. But after the hype and the troubles, what impact will Copenhagen actually have on the climate change threat? What are the possible paths forward, and what are their prospects for success?

The text of the Accord is as good a starting point as any. The Accord addresses the crucial issues of a cap on global warming, climate aid for developing countries, verification of national mitigation efforts, emissions from deforestation and progress toward a legally binding deal. It 'recogniz[es]', rather than endorses, 'the scientific view that the increase in global temperature should be below 2 degrees Celsius'. This represented a defeat for the African and small island states which argued that a 2 degree global rise would condemn them to destruction. ('Tuvalu Gone, But Still Hope for NYC', read *Scientific American's* upbeat headline.) Climate aid 'approaching' USD \$30 billion by 2012 was pledged, with the goal of \$100 billion annually transferred to developing

countries by 2020. This pledge is conditional on 'meaningful mitigation actions' and 'transparency' on the part of developing countries. But verification will be via 'international consultations and analysis' which must 'ensure that national sovereignty is respected'. The Accord is more emphatic on deforestation. It recognises the 'need' for 'immediate establishment of a mechanism including REDD-plus', or Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation.

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If deferred long enough, the targets deemed necessary now must eventually become impossible to achieve.

The Accord calls only for a legally binding treaty to be agreed 'as soon as possible', with implementation to be assessed by 2015. A draft provision calling for a 2010 deadline to wrap up negotiations was cut from the final text. The Accord is therefore a meaningful if flawed document. It is brief and general, the product of hurried negotiations between the United States, China and the other emerging powers to stave off a conference washout. Its potential impact will become clearer after the last day of January—the deadline set for nations to report their commitments under the



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Accord. Developed nations are to specify 'Quantified economy-wide emissions targets for 2020', while developing nations are to set out 'Nationally appropriate mitigation actions'. Until these two appendices, left blank in December, are filled in, the Accord will remain a shell. It is for the nations themselves, weeks after the Accord was 'noted' at Copenhagen, to decide how ambitious they will be.

With ten days to go, the UN was playing down the 31 January deadline. Yvo de Boer said he did not 'expect everyone to meet the deadline', allowing: 'You could describe it as a soft deadline, there's nothing deadly about it'. (But the text is quite clear on the deadline: national plans are 'to be submitted ... to the secretariat by 31 January'. Just how ignored must a document be before it makes the transition, as if across the Styx, from 'non-binding' to 'dead letter'?) De Boer stressed that nations were 'not being asked to take on a legally binding target, they will not be bound to the action. It will be an indication of their intent, an important tool to advance the negotiations'.

As the 'soft deadline' approached, the vast majority of states had not reported their plans. Many were still considering their ambitions. Meeting in Seville in January, European ministers did not withdraw their offer of an EU-wide 30 per cent emissions reduction by 2020, provided other developed countries made 'comparable' efforts. Belgium's Paul Magnette claimed that the 30 per cent target could give Europe's businesses 'first mover advantage' in the greening of the global economy, and warned that 'by staying with our [unconditional] twenty per cent target we might take the risk of losing the opportunity for major industrial change'.

If enough nations signal their intentions in the appendices, the Accord could well provide, in de Boer's words, 'a sense of direction' for further negotiations toward a final deal. UNFCCC parties will reconvene in Bonn in June for two weeks of negotiations, and the annual meeting of parties will be held in Mexico City towards the end of the year. Mexico has been anointed by many as the new Copenhagen—the venue where a comprehensive

legal agreement must be reached. Nevertheless, de Boer was merely stating the obvious by nominating 'Mexico or later' as the time for the conclusion of such a deal. After an inconclusive Copenhagen summit and a 'soft deadline' for national statements, why should the UN Framework's Executive Secretary have confidence that a deal will be reached in Mexico?

Confidence in the UN process has become a live issue. Plotting the slow progress of negotiations against the hardening scientific consensus and the increasingly grave projections, it is easy to conclude that a fresh approach is needed. A negotiating track within the G20 or the Major Economies Forum has obvious attractions. G20 nations account for the vast majority of historical, current and projected future emissions. They command the vast majority of technological and financial assets needed for a climate solution. There need not even be a legitimacy or agency problem: there is nothing to stop G20 nations agreeing on their own plan of action without imposing it on other nations. For its part, the Major Economies Forum or MEF has already initiated a clean technology program, including national action plans from its members.

US climate envoy Todd Stern endorsed the idea of a 'smaller group process', possibly within the MEF: 'there certainly needs to be one. The UNFCCC is an organization that has some historical credibility, but it had a lot of problems in Copenhagen—many days of potentially negotiating and making progress that just got locked up.' These whole working days were fed into the furnace of developing world outrage—disruptions that made the process look dysfunctional. Nevertheless, Stern cautioned that it would be 'premature to write off the UNFCCC'.

These questions of process, substance and timing crowd urgently upon the world's governments. As some have noted, the climate talks are not like a free trade negotiation which can stall, break down and resume, reaching in ten years much the same deal that might have been reached in five, with much the same results. We are told that climate change is intensifying. If so, then the longer action to mitigate climate change is deferred, the more drastic the action needs to be if dangerous climate change is to be averted. If deferred long enough, the targets deemed necessary now must eventually become impossible to achieve.

Yvo de Boer stated the situation in plain and compelling terms: 'Copenhagen did not deliver the full agreement that the world needs to address the collective climate change challenge. And that actually just makes the task at hand more urgent. And it means that the window of opportunity that we have to come to grips with this issue is closing faster than it was before.' Tipping points, positive feedback loops and other unwelcome developments beckon.

It was Flaubert, in the midst of the Franco-Prussian War, who declared: 'When this is over we shall still be stupid'. It remains to be seen whether the experience of Copenhagen has added to our store of wisdom. **a**

Arena Magazine Appeal

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Since our last issue, the appeal has raised \$1300 through the generosity of: Timothy Brandis, T.H., Stephen Pennells, Robert Fordham, Gavin Mooney & Del Watson, H.L., D.McK. and a number of anonymous donors.



Alert, Bumble Bees!

Steven John Marks

Management spiel in Australian universities

The management spiel of the neo-liberal age that Don Watson so wittily lambasts continues to proliferate—to triumph over other idioms as if no one ever heard of the ‘GFC’ or ‘great recession’ of 2009. We all now know many of the terms of this spiel. They have even penetrated into that holy of holies, Aussie Rules football commentary. Just when did players start playing ‘accountable football’ in ‘the leadership group’ for ‘franchises’, rather than teams?

Nowhere is safe, not from the highest corporate towers to the once-sacred groves of academe. We are all now ‘future-orientated’, ‘future-focused’, ‘change agents’, ‘proactively’ working ‘dedicated’ websites and other non-human things in ‘teams’, ‘clusters’ or ‘silos’, ‘managing expectations’ of ‘stakeholders’ but with a ‘customer focus’, and striving towards ‘industry best practice’, ‘actioning’ ‘deliverables’ and ‘outcomes’.

Yet, for all Watson’s successful exposure of weasel words and management-speak, the question remains what exactly is going on with the growth of this profoundly obfuscatory ideological language, and why it should have emerged in conjunction with neo-liberalism, long sold as the freest of all the free political and economic systems.

We go wrong if we only look to see the social function of this language hidden away behind its monotonous, mind-numbing surfaces. The truth of the new management spiel is actually ‘out there’, as Fox Mulder, and Slavoj Zizek, would say: it’s on the surface, in the very terms with which management spiel assaults the public consciousness.

I will speak anonymously about a recent experience. I work in an Australian university. Indeed I work in the critical humanities, together with other staff who have won their stripes and built their professional lives around the ability to critically analyse texts, languages and politics, and to smell a rat when it is presented to them under any other name.

Nevertheless, in line with the corporatisation of the university sector, my school—like academic schools all around the country—recently ran a series of ‘team

building days’. The aim was to improve staff wellbeing and efficiency, despite the notoriously worsening working conditions in Higher Education generally.

These team-building days bring to the university the good news of a new wisdom unknown to this demoralised staff. Apparently it was generated somewhere in a business school somewhere in North America at some point over the last twenty years. The new wisdom is called Open Space Learning. It involves ‘running processes’, meaning dividing staff into groups to get them to discuss proposed measures so as to achieve ‘outcomes’.

What is the compulsion to so patently infantilise adults and workers that seems to be written into management processes today?

However—and here’s the rub—these ‘processes’ promise to profoundly alter the way people usually walk, talk and do social business. First of all, they seem to be profoundly egalitarian, but in a way that cynics like me can’t help but suspect of being wilfully false to the larger organisational Truth. In Open Space Learning you can find yourself perched awkwardly next to your boss. But do not take fright: as long as the ‘process’ lasts, s/he is only one more participant; s/he can’t pull rank.

Things only get better when you realise that Open Space ‘processes’ seek to bring to your workplace a set of principles that resemble nothing so much as the highest forms of esoteric wisdom one finds in Eastern religions and the work of Baruch de Spinoza, without doubt one of the most difficult of Western philosophers.

It turns out that, in the enchanted dialogic spaces engendered by Open Space Learning, ‘whoever speaks, is the right person to speak’; ‘whatever happens, is the right thing to have happened’; and ‘whenever a thing happens, that is the right time for it to have happened’. Perhaps fortunately for those who find this all a bit cloying, the final caveat is: ‘when it’s over, it’s over’.

The genii behind ‘Open Space Learning might experience ‘very high’ customer satisfaction’ to learn that these principles condense what Spinoza called the *sub specie*

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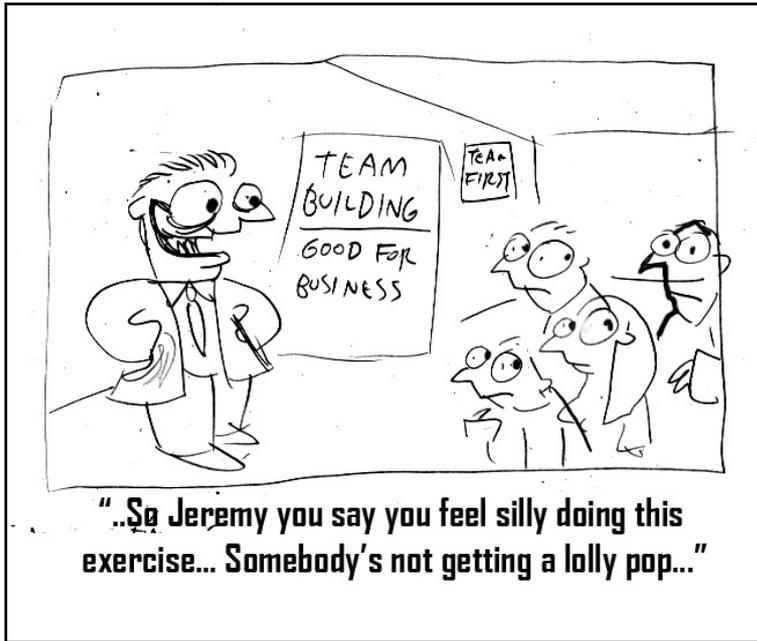
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aeterni perspective of God Himself, who can understand that what we finite souls experience as chance-ridden, and sometimes even a problem, has a deeper, providential necessity. It is a perspective that could, until recently, only be attained by rare sages. That such a teaching preaches reconciliation even to the most heinous disasters (freedom being but 'comprehended necessity', according to Spinoza) might make them somewhat less complacent.

Open Spaces, happily, is not addressed only to sages. Indeed, part of its perennial wisdom is that participants, formerly your friends and colleagues, are actually 'bumble bees'. They have assumed this initially quite disturbing new shape because anyone is free to come and go from any table at any time—any time, of course, being the right time. They are like bumble bees, who everyone knows come and go from different flowers, as they undertake their work of cross-pollination.

At the end of the process the bumble bees are to apply themselves to the task of writing down the ideas the 'hive' has 'pollinated' in thick, coloured textas (bees cannot use pens or word processors). These ideas are then displayed on a board out the front, whence one bumble bee from each group is charged with 'harvesting' the ideas. Although I do not know whether bumble bees do harvest what they pollinate, the author knows that pollination, Open Space-style, means reading through the texta'd dot points and presenting them to the entire family of worker bees, from all the different hives.

When the sweat has dried, there is something surely absurd about getting grown men and women to call each other bumble bees, and asking them to pollinate ideas with big coloured textas and harvest them, as if they were aged somewhere between three and ten years old. The absurdity is probably at its highest pitch when the bumble bees in question include Foucault and Marx scholars, multilinguists, political scientists and international relations experts. But why be exclusive? The idea of corporate executives, whose decisions affect the material wellbeing of thousands, reaching for their red and orange textas and accepting the patronising hocus pocus that they are bumble bees is surely disturbing enough.

So the question to harvest here is this: what is the compulsion to so patently infantilise adults and workers that seems to be written into management processes today? For Open Space is only one

option—the right option, of course—amongst many similar schools of New Wisdom, in all of which such infantilisation seems to be *de rigueur*. Readers might remember the episode of *The Office* where the group throws around the 'truth ball' so that each person who catches it has to fess up about their feelings and thoughts. Many readers will have some time in the last twelve months been asked to take up coloured textas for themselves, to 'pool' or 'workshop' ideas about how they can better work in their 'team', to generate better 'outcomes'.

Doubtless, the trick here is to try to make workers feel more at home in their workplaces, as well as to promote management's 'consultative' virtues. Such a device is necessary in a period where the security of contracts and the longevity of employment of Australians are at a new low, which is the concrete meaning of the talk of the 'dynamism' of the new labour markets. Another insight Slavoj Zizek might offer concerns the strange coincidence in later capitalism of families being increasingly opened out to the disintegrative forces of the market at the same time as our workplaces are being 'refamiliarised'. Your boss is no longer the somewhat mysterious guy in the dark suit who works on the top floor about whose life and motives you can only deferentially speculate. At least in the new managerial ideology, as in Open Space, they are 'just like you': Bill Gates, rather than John D. Rockefeller: your ambitious sibling, not your father.

Yet this familiarisation of managerial practice is surely overcompensation. Or rather, it reveals its hand in the way that, on its user-friendly surface, it equates workers with children, therefore dependents, and systematically patronises employees. I am reminded in particular of that classic of 1990s managerial-spiel-bubble *Where's the Cheese?*, where workers are equated with mice in a maze. Management can take away the cheese or introduce new barriers at any time to prevent them from reaching their goals. It is the unionised mice who then throw a huff and complain, while their dynamic, future-oriented, creative comrades get on with it.

There is something to Orwell's and Camus' old idea that undue complexity or simple opacity of language is almost always a marker of forms of social domination. When managers are increasingly answering to imperatives external to the firm—namely, those brought to it by the market—workers are one more (variable) cost and necessity to be managed. They are not the priority. They are also the only cost or necessity that, as human beings, tend to need to have its economisation, cutting, reduction, restructuring or down-sizing justified to it. Most people don't like having to flatly tell others that they are no longer necessary, that their hours or futures are uncertain—not much more than people like receiving such information.

How then to manage the disjunction between

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external imperatives and this all-too-human need to treat workers with some semblance of respect? The linguistic distortions of the new management spiel and the infantilisation of staff which it carries on its surface provide a compromise solution. The external imperatives are honoured, and the staff are patronised. More than this, decisions which have concrete negative effects for staff are repackaged. Not the result of anything so earthly as the struggle between capital and labour, they reappear, sublime, as ‘future-orientation’, ‘customer focus’, ‘dynamism’, ‘the necessities of the new global marketplace’, ‘the need to be forward-looking’, for workers to be ‘change agents’, and so on. A spade is no longer a spade: it is a ‘land-shifting-change-operator’, as it were. And the whole process

of nigh constant restructure can be smoothed by employee team-building days where staff get to use textas, poster pages and Nerf balls, and cross-pollinate their ‘valued feedback’.

Many features of new management spiel have been well documented, by Watson and others: the systematic changing of verbs into nouns, the turning of verbs into infinitives before turning them back into participles (as in ‘actioning’), the humanisation of non-human things (as in ‘dedicated websites’) and the reification or infantilisation of human beings. This is not a humanising language. Like Saruman in *The Lord of the Rings*, it has a mind full of wheels and machines; or economic cycles, accounting tables, graphs and figures. The battle against neo-liberalism hence, if it is to be won, must be fought not only at the level of public debate and policy. It needs also to be waged at the level of politics and culture, indeed the reclaiming of our natural languages. **a**

Health Monopolies

Don Monkerud

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Health Monopolies

Don Monkerud

Don Monkerud is a writer who lives in California.

Why does the United States accept a medical system that leaves citizens less healthy than those in other industrialised nations?

Despite much rhetoric to the contrary, most Americans support a government-sponsored system; however, when it comes to instituting changes, the health insurance monopolies have a stranglehold on Congress. They pay huge sums to control the debate and twist legislation to their advantage. Since 1998, over 400 mergers have left two conglomerates in control of the huge health care insurance industry. Mergers allowed insurers to raise prices, buy influence in Congress, and redistribute cost savings to shareholders. Consolidation increased rapidly. Between 2004 and 2005, twenty-eight health care mergers, valued at \$US53 billion, outpaced the number of health care mergers in the previous eight years combined.

Low interest rates, leverage and lax anti-trust enforcement by the Bush administration allowed conglomerates to take control of US health insurance. A 2009 report from *Fortune Magazine* reveals that the revenue of the top two companies account for \$US142 billion, or 36 per cent of the health care insurance market, while the top four gross \$US202 billion, almost three quarters of all health insurance.

‘During the Bush administration, there were no enforcement actions against health insurers’ anticompetitive, deceptive or fraudulent conduct’, David Balto, senior fellow at the Center for American

Progress, told the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation in July 2009. ‘There was tremendous consolidation in the market, and the Justice Department simply required minor restructuring of two mergers. There were no cases against anticompetitive conduct by health insurers.’

Health insurance monopolies do business under pseudonyms to hide their identities and project a false impression of competition in the industry. The largest, UnitedHealth Group, reported \$US81 billion in revenue in 2008 and sold products under such names as OptumHealth, Ovations and AmeriChoice. WellPoint, the second largest, has revenues of \$US61 billion and insures 35 million people under Unicare

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and Blue Cross/Blue Shield. Concentration is even greater on a state-by-state basis.

A 2006 study by the American Medical Association found that health insurance is 'highly concentrated' in 94 per cent of the states, and in a majority of the nation's largest metropolitan areas a single insurer controlled more than half the business. A 2007 study by Health Care for America Now found that in thirty-eight states, the top two insurers control 57 per cent or more of the market, and in fifteen states one insurer controlled 60 per cent or more of the market.

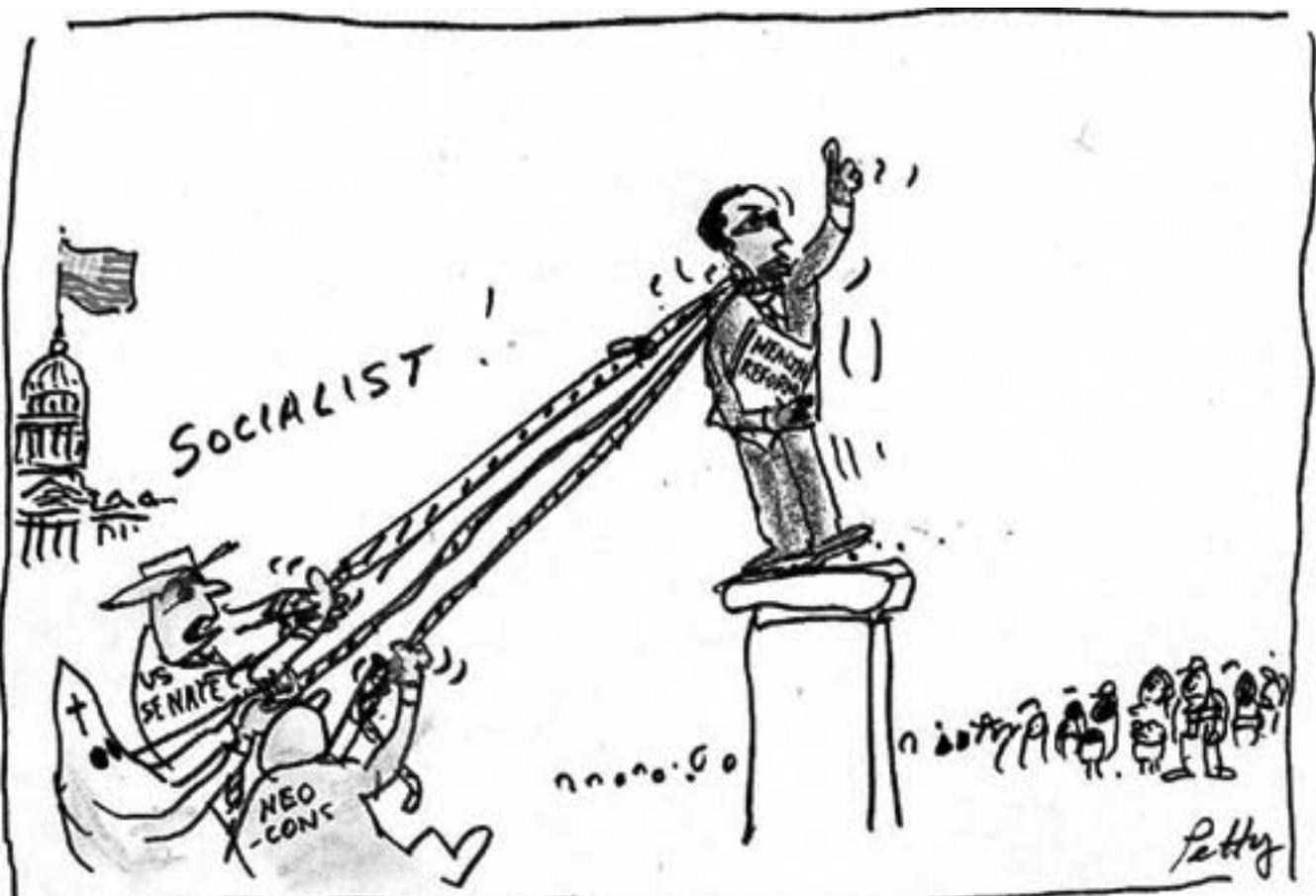
Facing the monopoly power of UnitedHealth Group and Wellpoint, smaller firms cannot compete: Aetna ranks third with \$US31 billion in revenue, and Humana is fourth with \$US29 billion. Of the 14 health care insurers, the smallest eight have yearly revenue of less than \$US12 billion. Such concentration stands in stark contrast to a 'free enterprise' system, where companies compete to lower costs and provide consumer choices. Instead, monopoly control raises prices unilaterally and controls every aspect of clients' health care. No wonder insurance premiums increased an average of 87 per cent in the past six years, according to FamiliesUSA.

Economists point out that most wage increases went to pay for health insurance from 2000 to 2009. For example, in New York, the cost of health insurance increased 93 per cent, while wages increased 14 per cent; in California, health insurance increased 109 per cent, while wages increased 26 per cent; and in Texas, health insurance rose 80 per cent, while wages rose 11 per cent. Insurers also have 'monopsony' power to dictate prices and coverage terms to hospitals and doctors, with profits redistributed to shareholders.

According to Securities and Exchange Commission findings, the major health insurers increased their profits by over 400 per cent from 2000 to 2008. Overall, profits rose from \$US2.4 billion in 2000 to \$US13 billion in 2007. CEOs were paid accordingly; their pay reaching 468 times that of the average American worker, with money left over to lobby against reforms.

According to the National Institute on Money in State Politics, the health care industry paid almost \$US400 million to politicians in state governments in the past six years. The Center for Responsible Politics discovered the industry spent over \$US1 billion in the past two years to oppose real reform. As the debate progressed, important consumer protection provisions were whittled away. 'Although the overwhelming majority of the American people support it, there's no public option, no end of the anti-trust exemption for the health insurance industry, no option for people over fifty-five to buy into Medicare, no ability of the government to negotiate drug prices or import cheaper drugs from Canada, and no real regulation of health insurance premiums,' said Zack Kaldveer, spokesman for the Consumer Federation of California. 'Yet, Congress is mandating everyone to purchase an overpriced product from a corrupt system. If premiums continue to rise, we'll be stuck wasting money on an unsustainable health care system.'

The insurance monopoly is pouring millions of dollars into creating misleading catchwords, carefully chosen to guide US public opinion. Reforms are needed to protect consumers from a vast monopoly, slowly draining people's wages into for-profit conglomerates. Without strict controls over these monopolies, the United States will be stuck with the same old predatory system. 



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Health Monopolies

Don Monkerud

→→→

DEBATE

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Nonie Sharp

Nonie Sharp is an
Arena Publications
editor.

After Copenhagen

Many people will be sacrificed over coming decades; so too animals, trees, rivers, country. This much became clear at Copenhagen, where representatives of the countries of the world responsible for our fate were gathered.

Are they faint-hearted? 'I believe they will sell us out', writes George Monbiot in the last days of the summit. Monbiot, an environmental writer with an awareness of the significance of what is happening, has good reasons for doubt. For him and for some others something terribly shocking, a portent of tragedy, hangs over the historic gathering. Because, he says, none of the leaders even raised the question of leaving reserves of fossil fuels in the ground.

Three or four years ago, Monbiot wrote *Heat: How to Stop the Planet Burning* (see 'Finding a Language that Speaks to Ourselves', *Arena Magazine* no. 87). There he wrote in warning mode: enjoy today unrestrained and be snuffed out for eternity. Now in the heartland of perhaps the most powerful story of wilful tragedy in the English language—Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Prince of Denmark—he speaks of betrayal, of a battle, not yet lost—against evil-doing among those holding court in Copenhagen on behalf of us all. A sense of tragedy—but not without hope—pervades his writing (see 'The rapacious will not give up without a fight', *The Age*, 16 December 2009).

Importantly, there is a new note in Monbiot's thinking today. Before, he wrote of our generations as 'the most fortunate that ever lived ... or ever will'; occupying as we do 'the brief historical interlude between ecological constraint and ecological catastrophe'. Now he sees civilisational catastrophe looming as real possibility, something akin to the ending of an epoch, a humanity being redefined, with the rapacious the

winners and the unsuccessful (in economic terms) sacrificed by political leaders, many of whom share Monbiot's awareness but dare not act. At this tragic moment we have the opportunity to face ourselves. At least he—and others—are not found wanting.

Yet Monbiot is blaming us, not just the leaders. Our own passivity underpins theirs. We too are enmeshed in setting out on our last adventure before the music fades. Numbled by self-seeking, combined with helplessness and anomie, the millions are not turning out in the streets, to Monbiot's dismay given the threat. Anaesthetised by the hope of personally rewarding adventure in new climes—as I have found, speaking too much about low-energy lifestyle is a friend-losing stance—people have withdrawn into themselves, mesmerised by a new freedom.

Yet there are people who see that doing nothing except pleasurable things is not an option. Those ones, both old and young, who walked alongside each other on Copenhagen Day, know this. Many others too. Gil Freeman (*Arena Magazine* no. 103) identifies the 'energy descent' pathway as a moral as well as political-cultural option. Responding with verve, with passion, with good sense, he, like many others, attempts to answer the question of our time: how to pursue a conversation of profound concern and make a perceptible difference in the same breath.

Living a low-energy life separately or in concert with others may seem small feed. But because it's a form of standing up to be counted, in the new context of the redefinition of humanity it is a sign of ongoing hope. It offers a reassurance to oneself and to others that humankind still bears the mark of what we hold dear: that we care for one another and for our companion, the earth.

From the standpoint of the Arena editors Monbiot's crossroads of unrestrained growth and rapacious

individualism, on the one hand, and pathways of restraint, on the other, have deep and complex roots. He doesn't identify the underlying source of the contemporary 'greed game'. That's something we at Arena try to do: by looking at underlying processes—arduous, challenging, easy neither to identify nor to convey readily to others. In *Arena Magazine* no. 100 we identified a two-stage process, now gathering strength, with direct bearing upon George Monbiot's 'crossroads'. The stakes are high for we are witnessing the transformation of human being where self-interest is equated with freedom; where we destroy our own humanity as a people in the name of freedom of the individual.

Arena Magazine is not solely a magazine of left commentary. Over a long time Arena's publications have been building up a distinctive social critique. Our commentary about the present and future comes out of that long process. Suddenly its meaning and implications are moving into the public sphere.

Today in 2010, a time of financial meltdown, of the United States as erstwhile global centre of growth, the project of exploiting the earth as a resource has triggered an epochal transformation that encompasses us all. Technoscientifically based processes can now yield a new material abundance and lifestyle variety. A mounting open-ended process feeds the individualist ethos. To take an example: in capitalist and post-capitalist lands vast numbers of us can now consume the tangible products of the hands of women and men. They can go anywhere on the planet in real or virtual terms, and this freedom persists even as the bounties of the earth fade (or melt), even as change and decay begin to surround us.

Fortunately, the best of humanity—I am taking George Monbiot as their articulate voice—resist in varied ways, finding the courage to face themselves; to begin a moral conversation, to reassert concern for the common good. Low



energy-based projects that keep popping up around the globe are just one expression of that slowly developing awareness upon which the future of all of us depends. **E**

Nonie Sharpe

debate

Transition and Raw Resources

The Transition Towns model for resilience against climate change and peak oil prioritises small steps and non-politicised action. This 'no-conflict' policy overrides all circumstances even when local communities are faced with the devastating behaviour of multi-nationals and their cohorts stealing their territory and polluting their environments. Undoubtedly the movement is presenting as one of the biggest community based initiatives we have seen for a long time, but while Transition Towns members focus on 'small steps', the mining companies, with government endorsement, are enjoying an industry boom on the back of climate change and peak oil. However, according to Gil Freeman (*Arena Magazine* no.103), Transition groups are not letting the big polluters 'off the hook' because 'to engage with neighbours in the community ... is to challenge everyone to take a very large step of reconsidering every aspect of our reliance on cheap oil'.

The Transition Towns community initiatives pale against the energy use and polluting practices of big corporations. Multinationals manipulate the markets allowing for no real progress in the acceptance of renewable energies. What starts 'small' will remain 'small' because it doesn't interfere with the industrial economy in any meaningful way. GDP is dependant on multinational companies raping our resources and the profits go overseas. This is hardly in the interest of communities. Freeman's assertion also concerns me because it doesn't include the need for communities to have a strong understanding of social justice and other ecology issues; or to make communities a vanguard against injustice and/or ecological crimes. If communities are not going to take on this role, who is?

In Britain the Leeds-based collective Trapese wrote a critique of the Transition Towns movement that focused on what transition might mean for social change. They welcomed the initiative, but posed the question, 'TT is about change, but is it about political change?' Trapese took issue with the movement not giving its support to the Rosspport community in County Mayo, who had spent more than five years fighting the Shell oil company. Shell was building a high pressure gas pipeline in their community. The issue gained international attention but it didn't inspire TT to change its view on pursuing only non-political action. Since then the British have been in a constant battle with the big polluters over the building of coal powered electricity stations aimed at using technology for sequestering CO₂s from coal and storing it underground, onshore and out at sea. This technology has been shown to be unsafe and economically unviable. According to Greenpeace scientists the Sleipner CO₂ project in the North Sea has been injecting about 1 million tonnes of CO₂ into a sea bed saline aquifer since 1996. It is a model that is held up by all governments as being safe, but in fact the project was abandoned in 2008 because of an incomplete understanding of the geology of the site. In May 2008 it was found to be leaking.

Much of Gippsland is in the process of transitioning to sustainability. In conjunction with this the state government has just released its 2050 vision, which gives focus to biodiversity, but what happens to biodiversity and sustainability when governments, state and federal, are underwriting unprecedented levels of mineral extraction and storing the waste along an already volatile coastline?

In 2008 *The Age* reported property owners along Gippsland's Ninety Mile Beach have had an estimated 95 per cent of the value of their land wiped out over concerns that climate change will see rising sea levels and their coastal blocks swamped. In all, up to \$30 million has been slashed from 2500 properties along Victoria's Gippsland coastline. There has been no mention that the coal industry has been sucking water out of the Latrobe aquifer for years, which is a common cause of land subsidence.

On 14 November 2007 there was a major collapse at the TRUenergy

Yallourn's open cut coal mine, which lies in the Latrobe Valley. It undermined the facility's full operation for three months and reduced the power station's generation output by more than two thirds. Water from the Latrobe River breached the northern slopes of the mine, causing a major subsidence. It flooded the mine with approximately two gegalitres of water. The correlation between the collapse at the mine and the falling coastline is evident in light of CSIRO's view but the connection was not articulated by the government or its agency the Department of Primary Industries.

In 2009 South Gippsland experienced a number of earth tremors along the fault lines with one quake, measuring 4.6 on the Richter scale; it struck about 5km northwest of Korumburra. This quake was 17km underground and shook the 63-storey Rialto Towers in Melbourne.

The Victorian state government's *Gas Geological Sequestration Act 2008* was the go-ahead for Carbon Capture and Storage. However, there was no data from long-term testing to affirm its safety. Nor were the communities in the region consulted.

In June of 2009, the Department of Primary Industries and Minerals Council of Australia (Victorian Division) held a Resources Technical Forum in Melbourne to examine all the relative issues surrounding the extension of gas, oil and coal production. The papers and computer modelling that came out of that forum highlight a number of concerns for residents of South Gippsland. They include the possible contamination of ground water and the possibility of multiple tremors and quakes, some around 5.7 in magnitude. CSIRO documentation makes clear that the extraction of minerals along the fault lines or the loss of ground water puts pressure on aquifers and increases risks of earth movement. As such there is a 'serious situation' section written into the *Greenhouse Gas Geological Sequestration* legislation. Transition groups take up a variety of positions in relation to large and small local and regional issues. Some are more politicised than others. But it is worth keeping in mind that some take their small-steps, anti-political orientation to



DEBATE / Chris James

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the point of even supporting the coal industry in, for instance, arguing that coal sequestration is a sustainable practice. The problem with Transition Towns is that a larger political framework does not draw them and their members together around a larger, explicit cultural-political framework of opposition. [a]

Chris James

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John Gray on Climate Change



DEBATE / John Martin

John Martin is the director of Creative Ground, a small group of people interested in sustainable living.

Experiencing disquiet at the current focus of climate change debate, I read with interest the recent essay by John Gray, 'Crisis Without End', in the November issue of *The Monthly*.

He asked us to imagine a cyber game premised upon a planet similar to ours. It has two stages. Stage One aims at finding a way to stop the rate of disruptive change caused mainly by an energetic race of monsters. Stage Two consists in restoring the planet to a semblance of health. I pictured John Gray as a somewhat patrician player of this game. At no point did I feel he was talking about a planet that I know and love, nor of a locality in which I live nor of the bewildering variety of places that nearly seven billion people call home. I found it a bloodless piece of analysis in which real human beings, birds, animals, plant-life and ecosystems had little purchase.

I saw the broad-spectrum thinker picking off the climate-change 'solutions' of this or that group. First there were the 'moralisers' (or, in Gray's words, 'much public discourse has a highly moralistic quality') who produce either 'token measures ...or demands for the reconstruction of the whole global economy'. Then came

'Western governments, development economists and environmentalists' who 'focus on renewable energy and sustainable development'. Finally there were those who believe the world must wean itself off oil, and those neo-liberal economists convinced the market has the answer. None of them has 'much leverage' on the problem as Gray sees it.

The rest of his essay may be summarised, I hope not unfairly, thus: the planet's inhabitants now find themselves on a climate change roller-coaster. This is to be taken as fact though 'it does not mean nothing can be done'. '[R]ealistic thinking' must prevail. 'Technological fixes' will have to be employed.

He ends with the suggestion that 'the chief obstacle to effective policy is a pervasive mentality of denial. There is intense resistance to the idea that the climate crisis is not fully soluble...' and that we 'will cope better if we give up unrealistic thinking and use our technological creativity to negotiate a crisis that can no longer be avoided'.

Gray's summary is useful though presumptuous. He acknowledges 'that disruptive climate change cannot be averted'. Therefore, 'the focus should be on securing civilised life from damage'. To, as it were, sanction 'civilised life' (a term left undefined), he suggests that the extra two billion set to enter the world over the next twenty years will want a similar lifestyle to that of the present 'affluent minority'. I find this perverse, knowing, as Gray himself must know, that such will prove impossible, and in all likelihood become increasingly improbable for those who now possess it.

How shall 'we' (privileged members of the West) sustain ourselves at a material 'civilised' level over the coming years? For Gray, this seems the nub of the issue, yet how many questions does it beg? It is not a question of 'How to?' or 'Can we?' but of 'Should we?'; given that 'civilisation', as usually understood, is dependent upon

high energy use, electricity, profligate use of resources, and the continuance of alliances between business and military interests and regressive or bendable regimes in various parts of the world.

Then there is the question surrounding the future of the world's democracies. Even if meaningful and rapid action is taken by industrialised and developing nations, there is no certainty that the disturbances brought about by climate change can ever be resolved back into predictable patterns, patterns that for centuries have allowed farmers to plant their crops and rely on their harvests. The matter then will not be maintenance of 'civilisation' but survival. And that will necessarily mean the curtailment of 'freedoms'.

Gray draws a line between what he sees as 'realistic' and 'unrealistic' thinking. His proposal, therefore, is that 'we' ('civilised cultures') cut smartly to the chase, making full use of our 'technological creativity to negotiate a crisis'. A 'high tech' solution is, however, far from a stand-alone element in a game. Any proposal finds itself embedded in a host of political, cultural and financial considerations. And if these are not prudently taken into account then yet more ill-conceived projects will be built upon shifting sands.

Gray's use of 'realistic' is more accurately rendered as 'scientific pragmatism', owing its lineage to the likes of Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes and Locke. But is this not the tradition that informed the Industrial Revolution in the first place? It is the narrowness and one-sidedness of the 'real' that was attacked so roundly by the English Romantics, in particular Blake, and the critique continued in the years ahead in the writings of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky and Heidegger. To draw upon our introspection, it is not difficult to see how much conscious thought is irredeemably a mixture of rationality, emotion, mood, desire and expectation.



A primary 'pragmatic response', then, to the plight of the planet will hardly suffice. It would be a shallow symptomatology, incapable of setting the deep and nourishing roots that the crisis demands. We might say that if the planet's checks and balances require a loving understanding and sensitive attempts at restoration then so too do the disordered psyches of the human race.

We may agree that climate change is caused or abetted by the burning of coal, gas and oil, and that an exponential rate of population increase has turned the human race into a plague. Yet what we take as fact on the physical plane is also fact on the spiritual plane. I employ the word in its widest sense transcending lines of culture or religion, and by it I also mean to accent the transcultural and psychological aspects of this debate.

Let's think of an example close to home. A farmer is told his industry is wasteful of water and land, his cattle a source of methane. An environmentalist informs him the world would be healthier if it ate lower down the food-chain. He is being told his farming is no longer viable. The man may agree with the criticism. For himself, though, his whole existence is called into question—his entire idea of himself as a person. This land and this farming is and has been his life. How can he forsake it? Here another point, easily understood, is overlooked. It is not the denialist or sceptic who needs to be convinced. It is the shop-assistant, the teacher, the dentist, the builder, the bloke next door.

Slow maturation is necessary to absorb central and powerful ideas. Thomas Malthus sowed the seeds centuries ago. Aldous Huxley, Rachel Carson and Paul Erlich were prophets of the mid twentieth century. Does the urgency of our plight permit a further slow-maturing? Deep in our minds lies an anguish that no amount of optimistic pragmatism will assuage. Western culture and increasingly the rest of the world continues to take immense pride in its ability to extract resources and turn them over to human use. Our disenchantment will remain until we can absorb the lessons that prudence, caution, humility and patience have to teach. These values represent a direct assault on the will to power.

Many years ago I came across the following words of Antonio Gramsci:

'The creation of a new culture does not only mean individually making some "original" discoveries. It means also and especially the critical propagation of truths already discovered, "socialising them" so to speak, and so making them become a basis for live action, an element of co-ordination and of intellectual and moral order.' 

John Martin

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A New Left Forming?

Around the world the financial crisis and climate change have focused many minds on a revival of the Left. Some people point to the success of socialists in South America or the election of Barack Obama, other point to the rise of a Left Party in Germany. Even Michael Moore's latest film, *Capitalism, A Love Story*, seems to be a straw in the wind. The fate of the Left was one of the topics at a conference of activists and thinkers at Deakin University recently and was discussed in an editorial of *Arena Magazine* (no. 102). The purpose of the conference was to rethink ideas from that broad political force known loosely as 'the Left'. In opening the conference, I described the Left's weakness as 'the crisis of ideas and values which express alternatives'. Others might call it a crisis in the political vision, or in the theory or the social philosophy of the Left. Perhaps paradoxically I argued that we could draw a lesson from the rise of neo-liberalism during the 1980s. Whatever else it illustrated, the rise of the Right showed that 'social change depends on political ideas embedded in an intellectual and moral framework'.

Putting it simply, the Left lacks such a framework. Instead of a framework, we have only issues and campaigns. Instead of projecting a vision, we are merely oppositionists and hyper-critics. All kinds of people are grouped under the rubric of the Left. Both militant coal miners from the CFMEU and coal critics from Greenpeace. There is an old Left, whose critique is based around the material deprivation and the need for redistribution; and a new Left—if that's the right word—whose critique is based around the unsustainability of the

economy and the empty affluence it creates. Neither has the answer and the danger is that this division will become an even deeper fault line than it already is.

Is a perfect agreement between the various sectors of the Left waiting to be discovered? I don't think such a new unifying ideology is possible, or even desirable. (In *Beyond Right and Left* I argued that agreement will be found in a set of values, rather than a new ideology or all-explanatory world view.) But the diverse sectors of the Left can do better in co-ordinating a wider agreement than they have now.

The process of finding what these values might be and then building a political strategy on top of them is a difficult one partly because there isn't a recognition that there is indeed a problem in the first place.

For one part of the Left a simplified Marxist-influenced theory of society and politics still forms a default position. It's also a sentimental option because there is a long and proud heritage of working class struggle. Such a theory assumes that all social evils arise from the economy and from economic deprivation. If capitalism is the cause of all injustices then clearly you need to stick to a theory which aims to abolish capitalism in its entirety.

But it is obvious that significant kinds of oppression and injustice are not caused by capitalism. Patriarchy and women's oppression pre-date capitalism, as do racism and ethnocentrism. Unsustainability is aggravated by ruthless corporate power but if we have to abolish capitalism in order to achieve sustainability then we may be waiting a long while. As a political theory, opposition to capitalism as such is also flawed because non-capitalist societies has proved such a disaster. The actual consequences of anti-capitalism has been a string of grotesque societies which are a travesty of any democratic or socialist values. This has been recognised for decades, but some on the Left still haven't faced the fact that aspects of Marxist theory contributed to the disaster.

The problem which the Left exists to solve has also changed. Marx and Engels saw poverty as the main

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John Martin

problem and assumed that capitalism could not harness the forces of production to satisfy human needs. Today the forces of production are in overdrive, generating an output that threatens to drown humanity in a climate disaster.

Some parts of the Left realised these fatal weakness of Marxism many years ago. This cultural left, based largely among intellectuals, developed a more sophisticated analysis of power and culture. Basing themselves on the social movements of women, youth, gays and ethnic groups, they challenged the values and beliefs of dominant culture and ideology. This successful challenge made for a freer, more diverse society. But the trajectory of the cultural left has run into sand. Its central of ideas of freedom and diversity fitted the emerging consumer capitalism which dissolved much of its cutting edge for social

change in a sea of affluence. As well, the cultural left has never developed a political strategy or identified a base for social change. Moreover, significant anti-scientific strains within its world view make it hard to identify with the other radical movement based around the environment.

What to do? In past articles in Arena I have argued that the main circumstances which requires attention from the Left is the dramatic and accelerating threat of global warming. This threat is moving to be the fulcrum of our political situation for decades. Here we find a further complication for any revival of progressive ideas. So much of politics today has been professionalised. The largest environment groups are elite organisations which conduct their politics through symbolic actions designed for media attention. Mass action is seen as

an adjunct to a strategy based on media and on lobbying governments. No perspective exists to make mass participation a central feature of action for change. Yet historically we know that societies only undergo change when large numbers of people take extended, demonstrative action.

The most pressing issue is the need to reinvent an inspiring, new kind of mass politics to struggle for sustainability and against the powerful coal, energy and electricity corporations. Perhaps with this urgent need in mind the fragments of the Left can begin to engage in a collective effort to provide a synthesis of ideas, values and theory. Then, maybe, we will see 'a new Left forming' as *Arena Magazine's* editorial suggested. 

David McKnight

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DEBATE

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David McKnight

David McKnight lectures in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Being Arab: Arabism and the Politics of Recognition

Edited by Christopher Wise and Paul James

Being Arab appears at a time of unprecedented historical crisis for non-sectarian Arabist thought and social movements. Events of the last decade, especially the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, have drawn many analysts to conclude that the era of Arab identity politics has passed. Some even assert that the 'defunct' category of 'the Arab' was little more than an ideological tool of Western imperial powers, one that never served the interests of the peoples of the Middle East and Africa.

This volume rejects the assumption that the dream of a strong, unified Arab world was never more than a fantasy of out-of-touch academics, nor little more than a crude instrument of Arab elites and Western imperialists. It is clear that the embattled concept of 'the Arab' urgently requires investigation, analysis and rethinking. Some commentators even suggest that the resurrection of 'the Arab' and political Arabism is the pre-eminent issue.

The theme of the historical meaning of Arab identity is pursued in this book in the hope of making a modest contribution towards strengthening viable, non-sectarian and democratic alternatives to Islamist fundamentalism in the Arab world. The question of what it means 'to be Arab' is deliberately oriented towards the future, while remaining attentive to the setbacks of the past.

Christopher Wise Arabism Now; **Aisha Khawaja Razem** Poems; **Hala Abu Taleb** Arabness: Between Life and Death; **Ella Shohat** Black, Jew, Arab: Postscript to **The Wretched of the Earth**; **Diana Abu-Jaber** Identity: On Recognition and Nation; **Paul James** Displacement: In Cities of the Unrecognized; **Ella Shohat** in conversation with **Christian Höller** Diasporic Thinking: Between Babel and Babylon; **Ned Curthoys** Diasporic Visions: Al-Andalus in the German-Jewish Imaginary; **Matthew Jess Atwood** Democratic Potentials: Bish Arabism in Israel-Palestine; **Gilbert Achcar** in conversation with **Christopher Wise** Arab Nationalism after Iraq; **Jamal R. Nassar** Nationalism and Islam at the Crossroads; **Ralph Coury** Encountering Pan-Arab Nationalism: A Culture War; **Ali A. Mazrui** Afrabia: From Divergence to Afro-Arab Convergence; **Fallou Ngom** Taboo Racism: The Mouride Perspective on Arabism; **Christopher Wise** Arabism and Jihad in the Sahel; with works by **Mona Saudi**.

RRP AUD\$33 US\$27

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No 104

Men of Flowers

Humphrey McQueen

Charles Darwin, Joseph Hooker and Gregor Mendel: dramatising the life of plants

Despite Charles Darwin's confessing in 1843 to an 'entire ignorance of Botany', he had, before his death in 1882, inherited the laurel of *Jupiter Botanicus*. On the centenary of *On the Origin of Species* in 1959, population geneticist J. B. S. Haldane valued Darwin's botanical researches more highly than his earlier work on evolution. In truth, those elements were inseparable, since he supported natural selection with studies of plants, notably their sexual reproduction. So significant was flora to Darwin's conceptualising of evolution that he elaborated on the metaphor of a branching bush to illustrate his version of descent with modification:

The green and budding twigs may represent existing species; and those produced during each former year may represent the long succession of extinct species. At each period of growth all the growing twigs have tried to branch out on all sides, and to overtop and kill the surrounding twigs and branches, in the same manner as species and groups of species have tried to overmaster other species in the great battle for life. ... As buds give rise by growth to fresh buds, and these, if vigorous, branch out and overtop on all sides many a feebler branch, so by generation I believe it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its every branching and beautiful ramifications.

Speciation was neither a ladder with steps, nor a chain with missing links.

No direct line ran from *homo sapiens* to gorillas, instead, and always, divergent varieties suggested their lineage.

As if to compensate for the transparency of his illustration of natural selection by a single branching bush, Darwin concluded *The Origin of Species* with an invitation for his readers

to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.

As a scientist, Darwin strove to disentangle that appearance of chaos from a regularity which in no way was divinely ordained. Advancing on those precepts, his successors are revealing how the tangled bank of soil, worms, birds, insects and plants is evolving through law-bound exchanges among unicellular archaea and bacteria.

Hence, the vegetable kingdom played a bigger role in Darwin's science than it now does in his popular reputation. Indeed, in the opening chapter of *The Origin of Species*, dealing with 'Variation under domestication', animals compete for space with apples, cabbages, gooseberries, pears, strawberries and wheat. Chapter eight on 'Hybridisation' relies on flowers for much of its materials, as do the chapters on geographic distribution. A few years later, Darwin was beginning 'to think that they [plants] are more wonderful than animals', and just before his death had been pleased 'to exalt plants in the organic scale'.

In fulfillment of a promise in *The Origin* to 'detail all the facts, with references, on which my conclusions have been grounded', Darwin published seven volumes on botanical subjects. Notwithstanding his outpourings about plants, media interest in Darwin's theory of evolution remains fixated on animals, principally, and pointlessly, on the missing links from primates to humankind. Yet, the heart of Darwin's account is that all species originate from a single organism. Hence, we are related to bananas as well as to chimpanzees. Anthropocentrism accounts for some of the bias against the vegetable. Bishop Wilberforce is remembered for twitting Thomas Huxley about whether his ape ancestors were on his mother's or his father's side, not for demanding to observe a turnip striving to become a cleric. Although the shared origins of flora and fauna are as

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Men of Title dark:
Flowers

Humphrey McQueen

Humphrey McQueen is a cultural commentator and freelance historian and journalist. He is the author of nineteen books covering history, the media, politics and the visual arts, most recently *A Framework of Flesh* (Cinninderra Press, Adelaide, 2009).

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menacing to the creationists as is a common ancestor for gorillas and human beings, the latter challenges our pride of species whereas our cousinage with legumes seems so remote as to be irrelevant. Not even many philosophers think of parsnips as possessing rational souls.

Moreover, the advantages that geneticists derive from experimenting on fruit flies (*Drosophila*) have skewed the focus onto the fly away from the fruit. This imbalance of expert interest had not been the case among Darwin's cohort for whom tampering with *Nicotiana* provided results more swiftly than did the breeding of Pouter pigeons.

Darwin's contributions to botany had a shifting relationship to the flora of Australia. Before he had been born, British naturalists knew of its abundance from the collections that Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander had made with James Cook, displayed at Botany Bay House in the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew. However, even had Darwin been as interested in botany as he was in geology before joining H.M.S. *Beagle* he could not have become familiar with the resources at Kew because the Gardens were in decline, and not revived as a scientific centre until after his return.

The heart of Darwin's account is that all species originate from a single organism. Hence, we are related to bananas as well as to chimpanzees. Anthropocentrism accounts for some of the bias against the vegetable.

The offer of a berth on the *Beagle* in 1831 extended a tendril to the vegetable kingdom since it came via the Professor of Botany at Cambridge, Joseph Henslow, with whom Darwin recalled he had, as an undergraduate during 1831, 'lived much ... often dining with him and walking with'; mostly to discuss geology. Darwin went on board the *Beagle* as companion to Captain X FitzRoy who feared insanity if status obliged him to dine alone for years on end. After the designated naturalist, naval surgeon Robert McCormick, quit four months into the voyage, Darwin extended his collecting beyond rocks and beetles, yet he missed much that was under his nose, notoriously, the speciation of finches at the Galapagos atoll, admitting in the third volume of *Zoology of the Voyage of Beagle: Birds*: 'Unfortunately I did not suspect this fact until it was too late to distinguish the specimens from the different islands of the group; but from the collection made for Captain FitzRoy, I have been able in some small measure to rectify this omission'. John Gould sorted out the muddle.

When Darwin visited Australia between January and April 1836, he was in the wrong places or at the wrong times of year to appreciate our flora. Entering Sydney Harbour with expectations of a 'verdant country', he regretted that the shores evoked the desolation of Patagonia. When he traveled inland, the 'extreme uniformity of the vegetation' depressed him,

the more so because of its 'peculiar pale green tint; without any gloss', the 'brown pasture' around Bathurst seeming 'wretched'. Along the Derwent, he took pleasure in cultivation reminiscent of England, the 'bright yellow fields of corn, and dark green ones of potatoes, appear very luxuriant', though he was also struck by some fern-trees. King George's Sound proved to be the dullest time in his five years of voyaging, the grass-trees 'coarse'. His chapter on Australia concluded: 'he who thinks with me will never wish to walk again in so uninviting a country'. Had the *Beagle* arrived in July, Darwin would have seen wattles in bloom, and stood to be amazed at the flowering of a biota, which is distinctive of the continent's south-west, now a magnet for tourists. By the time he wrote *On the Origin of Species* during 1859, he acknowledged Australian flora to be 'rich in species', and apologised for his dismissal of it: 'it seems to me to be as rash in us to dogmatise on the succession of organic beings throughout the world, as it would be for a naturalist to land for five minutes on some one barren point of Australia, and then to discuss the number and range of its productions'.

Darwin's poor preparation for Australian flora contrasts with the training of Hooker, whose father had been professor of botany at Glasgow before taking charge of Kew Gardens in 1841. The younger Hooker eventually wrote up his 1840–41 researches in Van Diemen's Land in *Flora Tasmaniae* (1860) as Part III of *The Antarctic Voyage of H.M. Discovery Ships 'Erebus' and 'Terror', in the Years 1839–1843*. Countering Darwin's disappointment, Hooker reported that 'The flora of Australia has been justly regarded as the most remarkable that is known', with more unique examples than most regions with an estimated 8000 species. During the five years to 1859, Hooker catalogued 7000 Australian specimens in the Kew Herbarium, a labour equal to Darwin's on barnacles. Darwin badgered him for specimens and guidance, for example, on the sex of Australian trees for *The Origin*.

In an essay accompanying *Flora Tasmaniae*, Hooker proposed his own account of natural selection. He had been Darwin's first confidant on the subject, a disclosure which Darwin regretted in case he had prevented his friend from arriving 'at the figurific mixture independently'. The chances of Hooker's becoming a third co-discoverer of natural selection were slender since he admitted that it was only after the 'ingenious and original reasonings' by Darwin and Wallace before the Linnaean Society in 1858, that he had accepted that

‘species are derivative and mutable’. Even so, he shifted about. While species evolved, the naturalist had to describe each specimen as if it were ‘fixed’. On the publication of *The Origin* late in 1859, Hooker became the most reliable and responsible defender of natural selection, the rock on which the coming generation built their science.

If the botanical materials for *The Origin* had been written in collaboration with Hooker, the book’s rhetorical arrangement was Darwin’s alone, his opening chapter being an exercise in persuasion more than an exemplar of scientific reasoning. Darwin began with artificial breeding, not with natural selection, which he reserved till chapter four. This arrangement was a gambit towards insinuating his grand theory. He deployed the evidence from artificial selection to prepare his readers’ minds for the possibility of descent with modification through natural selection. Artificial selection also provided Darwin with an explanation for why ‘we cannot recognise, and therefore do not know, the wild parent-stocks of the plants which have been longest cultivated in our flower and kitchen gardens’.

Although artificial breeding suggested that the mutation of species was possible and showed how common ancestry was concealed, a hurdle remained: domestication exposed the maker’s hand, as Wallace remonstrated. Darwin’s answer was that farmers or fanciers did not plan for long-term transformations into a new species, but merely corrected one feature at a time, weeding out ‘rogues’. The intention to enhance a single characteristic could not leap over the step-by-step processes of natural selection.

While instances of the artificial selection of plants were plentiful, the paleo-botanical record was barren compared with the evidence from rocks, and slighter even than the scatter of skeletal fossils, matters to which Darwin addressed himself in a chapter ‘On the Imperfection of the Geological Record’. A plant which became extinct left little trace beyond its putative connections to others that had branched from some common ancestor. Darwin’s generation had no tools, neither conceptual nor experimental, to demonstrate how surviving species confirmed that lineage.

When Darwin did opine on fossil plants he was wrong, being convinced that

coal came from mangroves, a view from which Hooker could not dissuade him. Here, too, a persistence in error stemmed from commitment to a larger disagreement with Hooker over geology. Barnacle-like, Darwin stuck fast to his vision of land masses rising and falling into the seas to deny the catastrophism he feared to be lurking in Hooker’s reliance on a break-up of super-continents to explain the presence of similar plants in Tierra del Fuego, Tasmania and Kerguelen. Darwin accepted that land masses subsided to leave behind islands or coral atolls, and rose to form continents, allowing continents to evolve vertically but not sideways. Noting the presence of related species across oceans, Darwin ‘admitted that these facts receive no explanation on the theory of evolution’. Nonetheless, he devoted chapter eleven to refuting Hooker’s position. To support his alternative of migration, he germinated seeds after their prolonged emersion in salt water, and propagated others extracted from bird droppings. The idea that drove Darwin towards distraction is now taken for granted as Gondwana.

Despite obstacles to the establishing of descent with modification across the botanical record, Darwin’s first book after *The Origin* wove studies of the most ‘advanced’ genera of plants—orchideae—with high theory to produce *On the Various Contrivances by Which British and Foreign Orchids Are Fertilised by Insects, and the Good Effect of Interbreeding*.

Although Darwin pictured orchids as the ‘fairyland of science’, he demonstrated how their fertilisation supported natural selection: ‘orchids ought to show us how ignorant we are of what is useful’ and thus ‘quite to repudiate the doctrine of beauty being created for beauty’s sake’. Introducing *The Effects of Cross and Self Fertilisation in the Vegetable Kingdom* in 1876 as ‘the complement of that on Orchids’, Darwin stressed ‘how admirably these plants are constructed so as to permit of, or to favour, or to necessitate cross-fertilisation’. A creationist might have interpreted the co-adaptation of flowers and insects as proof of the harmony installed by a beneficent designer. Darwin took the opposite tack. Descent with modification through natural selection is possible because inheritance can vary with sexual reproduction. Darwin envisaged his volume on orchids as a reply to the eight *Bridgewater Treatises* (1830s) which, guided by the Archbishop of Canterbury and funded by the penitent Earl of Bridgewater, had discerned divine beneficence in every twig and tweet.

Darwin knew that no one could conduct experiments to refute or confirm the theological account of the origins of life, or even for speciations, since those moments were unrepeatable. Instead, he launched a flanking action by asking ‘why sex?’, in other words, why the near universality of one method of reproduction, namely cross-fertilisation, and not self-fertilisation, which seemed to be more advantageous to the persistence of each species. His answer was that sex was almost universal so as to guarantee variation, not just to propagate.

Darwin’s answer to ‘why sex?’ justifies the significance that scientists award to his botanical work. Indeed, even posing the question ‘why sex?’ merits praise. Linneaus’ classifying plants by their sexual features horrified almost as much as did Freud’s views about children’s sexuality. Despite the shift towards prurience that had been underway from the 1790s when grandfather Erasmus’ verse treatise, *The Love of*

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the Plants, became the most popular English poem, neither Parson Malthus nor valetudinarianism deterred Charles from fathering ten children, from flirting into old age and from favouring fiction with pretty girls. In his orchid book, he valued ‘the figure of *Pterostylis trullifolia* from Mr Fitzgerald’s great work’ for showing ‘plainly the relation of all the parts’, its sex organs. Finding Darwin’s illustrations ‘more lurid than Georgia O’Keefe’s flower paintings’, the literary critic Stanley Hyman appreciated how Darwin had dramatised the life of plants by concentrating on their fertilisation.

Here, Darwin began this argument from a disjunction between his observations and the argument from design—one instance of his counter-hypothetical-deductive method. The ‘structure, colour, ornament’ of living forms were more prolific than was necessary for reproduction. An omniscient omnipotence could have achieved that purpose with greater economy. So, why was so much sex appeal on display? Darwinians used such extravagance against the creationists, asking whether it was evidence of divine ornamentation. If so, then God was a trickster. Darwin’s evidence for sexual selection drove creationists into picturing their god as an aesthete. They were back to ‘the good, the true and the beautiful’, as were several prominent Darwinians. Darwin had turned the tables on the creationists. Just as Paley had proved design by the foolishness of supposing that a watch could have come into existence by chance, Darwin challenged the association of design with aesthetics. Beauty in nature was neither for its own sake, nor a prelude to the celestial vision, but of use in the struggle for survival.

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A parade of researchers, standing by turns on each other’s shoulders, rendered risible Kant’s conviction that the inner lives of plants must remain unknowable.

Darwin aimed his volume on orchids at that strand of the market that could afford glasshouses and gardeners, like the Darwins and the Wedgwoods. The book sold well to genteel society but provided the Duke of Argyll, in his *Reign of Law* (1868), with a weapon with which to harry Darwin about colours and features for sexual selection rather than as God’s plaything. Drawing a line between Argyll’s opinion that ‘Ornament as much an End in the Workshop of Nature as in the Jeweller’s Workshop’ and Darwin’s comment that ‘the Orchideae exhibit an almost endless diversity of beautiful adaptations’ is not easy. Both sides assumed that what was beautiful to humans was also attractive to other species. Darwin, for instance, could not believe that the ‘horn-like protuberances in the cocks of certain fowls &c’ were ‘attractive to the females’.

While Argyll appealed to the devout, two other sets of critics struck from within the demesnes of science. The first were geo-physicists taking temperatures down mine-shafts who revised the age of the earth down from several hundred million years to as few as one hundred on the count of their spokesperson, Sir William Thompson (later Lord Kelvin). That span was too brief for the mutation of a bacteria into a human brain,

which needed many more millions of years. Not for the last time, physicists were as errant as they were arrogant. After 1900, the discovery of radium and related elements brought the calculation of the age of the earth up towards four billion years, longer than Darwin ever imagined possible. Those researches came decades too late to exorcise the ‘odious spectre’, as Darwin depicted Thompson’s claim.

Fleeming Jenkin, a professor of engineering and Thompson’s business partner, delivered the second challenge in 1867 by pointing out that a variation in one individual would be diluted before it could initiate a mutation. He gave the example of a white person interbreeding with a population of blacks. The whiteness from a single breeder could have no effect on the race; such a shift required mass miscegenation. Darwin accepted Jenkin’s demonstration that descent with modification through natural selection was a statistical improbability because, like almost everyone else at the time, he assumed that inheritance proceeded through a ‘blending’ of all the elements of an organism. ‘Swamping’ undermined Darwin’s position.

Confronted with twin assaults from geophysicists and mathematicians, Darwin could have adopted one of three strategies. First, he might admit defeat; secondly, he could cleave to evolution but admit causes that accelerated modification; or, thirdly, he could take the challenge from Jenkin as a starting point to uncover the inner working of inheritance. Darwin opted for a variant of retreat while embarking on a line of inquiry to sustain natural selection as the prime, though not the sole mechanism. Once he accepted the judgement of the geo-physicists, he sought mechanisms which went faster than natural selection for bringing about mutation. To that end, he made room for inheritance of acquired characteristics.

No accelerator could rebut Jenkin. Darwin needed a different structured dynamic. In Darwin’s words, ‘[t]he laws governing inheritance are quite unknown’. Following van Baer’s discovery of cells in 1828, little work was done on their functioning until the 1880s. Darwin conceived *pangenesis*, with ‘pan’ highlighting that every characteristic of the mates was carried by zillions of ‘gemmules’ through the sperm and germ cells to the new generation. This explanation proved a nullity but Darwin developed it to ward off the creationists. In all his wrong-turns and dead-ends, he never sought refuge in any purpose outside the mechanisms for survival. As a materialist, he pursued physical causes

within the processes of inheritance, with nary a trace of a Life Force.

Darwin knew that blending was not universal. Throwbacks were an embarrassment to families when features from a non-white ancestor popped up in a later generation. The same happened with pigeons and primula, when they were referred to as 'sports'. He knew of no offspring reverting to some one ancestor after the twentieth generation. But why did the reversions occur at all? As early as *The Origin* he reported instances that could have triggered a quest for an answer:

To keep up a mixed stock of even such extremely close varieties as the variously coloured sweet-peas, they must be each year harvested separately, and the seed then mixed in due proportion, otherwise the weaker kinds will steadily decrease in numbers and disappear.

To ascribe this pattern to the survival of the fittest told him nothing about how what took place inside each plant might effect natural selection.

By coincidence, the concepts and data needed to refute Jenkin emerged at the same time as physicists disproved the calculations of Kelvin. Researchers into the laws of inheritance replaced blending with separation and recombination, sparked by the reinterpretation of an 1866 article by the Austrian monk Gregor Mendel on the cross-breeding of garden peas. Its author was nowhere nearly as reclusive, or his journal as obscure, as legend has us believe. Given Darwin's omnivorousness for information, his failure to encounter the issue of the proceedings of the Brunn Society of Natural Science carrying Mendel's 44-page report was a matter of chance. After all, the German Academy of Naturalists had made Darwin a member in 1857, and he received advance notice in 1863 of the exactly preserved fossil of a reptilian bird uncovered in Germany. As Darwin kept in touch with developments around the globe, Downe became a clearing house for specimens and manuscripts with experts and cranks clamouring for attention. Had Darwin not been so methodical, we might suppose that Mendel's paper arrived in the post, only to be lost under the bird skins, Queensland wax flowers and piles of the *Gardeners' Chronicle*.

Let us adopt one of Darwin's favourite moves by relying on our imagination to

picture his reading Mendel in the late 1860s. His German and mathematics were adequate for him to understand the ratios. If not, his sons were on hand to clarify, or his statistician cousin, Francis Galton, to carry him beyond the binomial. Technical capabilities, however, do not guarantee comprehension. Would Darwin's response have been that attributed to Huxley upon reading Darwin and Wallace on natural selection—'How extremely stupid not to have thought of that'? Almost certainly not. At a psychological level, making one breakthrough can mean that its discoverer never sees past that insight, or even around it. (Upholders of quantum theories put Einstein into that category.)

Now let us take a further leap into Darwin's imaginary to watch him conducting Mendel's experiments for himself. He cross-bred plants, including garden peas. He had the patience and meticulousness to carry through seven years of collecting data, as he demonstrated in 1862 by putting off publication of the results of experiments on *Lythrum salicaria* until he could make '126 additional crosses'. Part of the explanation for Darwin's failure to propose Mendel's ratios was that his elaborating the intricacies of fertilisation deflected his interest. It seems likely that Mendel himself did not understand just how his discoveries had overturned blending. Thirty more years of research into cells were needed before biologists could grasp the significance of his ratios.

Darwin's 'great Tree of Life' challenged the place trees, whether actual or allegorical, held in the minds of Anglicans, whether the fruit of the Tree of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden, which led to the Fall, or the agony of the Christ on a tree redeeming humankind. *The Origin* needed no declaration of disbelief for Christians to recognise that its author rejected their vision of life eternal. More generally, Darwin's exaltation of the botanical represented the triumph of materialism over the Philosophical Idealism that had allowed Immanuel Kant in *The Critique of Judgement* (1790) to proclaim that the discovery of cells in 1828 through to DNA in 1953, via chromosomes and proteins, and onto polymerase chain reactions and genetically modified canolla, could never take place:

to hope that a Newton may one day arise even to make the production of a blade of grass comprehensible, according to natural laws ordained by no intentions, such an insight we must absolutely deny to man.

Indeed, Kant thought it 'absurd for man even to conceive of such an idea'. No botanical Newton arose to do all that; instead, a parade of researchers, standing by turns on each other's shoulders, rendered risible Kant's conviction that the inner lives of plants must remain unknowable.

Life, and our knowledge of it, are best understood in light of 'Darwin's orchid' (*Angraecum sesquipedale*) which long defied efforts to observe its fertilisation. Anti-Darwinians contended that no creature could reach the nectar which was 30cm down a spur. In 1903, a researcher on Madagascar identified a moth (*Xanthopan morgani*) with the necessary length of proboscis. Less than optimal design, like gaps in knowledge, are proof against perfection and purpose. The sub-title that Nobel laureate in physiology Salvador Luria gave to his 1974 essays is as true for organisms as it is for our understanding of their modifications: '*the unfinished experiment*'. **a**

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Men of Title dark:
Flowers**Humphrey McQueen**

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Shock Me Please,
I'm Crazy**Michael O'Loughlin**

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Shock Me Please,

I'm Crazy

Michael O'Loughlin

Is Australia still a victim of the delusions of psychiatry?

She is a 97-year-old female. She lived alone, we are told, in 'an inner-city flat'. The government provided her with weekly housework assistance, and her nephew prepared her meals every day. She presented at the hospital expressing 'delusional ideas of worthlessness, guilt and poverty'. She felt she did not deserve to eat or drink. She was agitated and dishevelled. She was unable to give informed consent to electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). The Mental Health Review Tribunal made the decision for her and she received an order for treatment with ECT up to three times a week. After the fourth round of treatment she suffered a 'significant adverse event' when she fell out of bed and fractured her femur, necessitating surgery. The doctors were unsure if this was related to 'nocturnal confusion post-ECT'. She received surgery for the fracture and then ECT resumed. After surgery she was only moderately depressed, and 'reportedly enjoying her meals and participating in social interaction on the ward'.

This event took place in Sydney and was reported in *Australasian Psychiatry* in 2007. While acknowledging that it might be advisable 'to consider extra measures to reduce safety risks in the very old', the authors conclude that there are no contraindications to using ECT in adults as old as her. We know nothing of the reasons for her guilt, depression or agitation. She could not give a history at the time of admission. However, we are assured that post-ECT she gave a history with no remarkable life-events. Could her confusion have been replaced by amnesia? Because of post-surgical complications she was ultimately moved to a geriatric facility. Sometimes, it seems, the cure may be worse than the disease.

What are we to make of this event? What are we to make of the increase in the past decade or so from 10,000 cases of ECT administration annually in Australia to close to 20,000? What of the 203 children under fourteen who received ECT in 2008, according to the *Herald Sun*? Of those children under fourteen, what of the fifty-five children four years of age or younger who received shock treatment? What are we to make

of the 500 Australian children under five, including forty-eight babies, who, *The Australian* recently reported, are receiving anti-depressant medications? Bioethicist Nicholas Tonti-Filippini supported the use of shock therapy with very young children, according to *The Herald Sun*, because some toddlers are 'disturbed'.

It is well-established that ECT works by providing sufficient current to create a grand mal convulsion. *The Herald Sun* tells us that Dr. Paul Skerritt, of the Australian Medical Association, stated that ECT works by producing an 'epileptic' type fit that helps rewire the brain. Why did the Health Department of West Australia produce a pamphlet in 2001 (withdrawn after a complaint) stating that ECT produced only 'a small electric current' and why did they claim that 'there is no medical evidence that the brain is damaged' despite the numerous studies (for a summary see Linda Andre's recent book *Doctors of Deception*) documenting the cognitive and memory deficits that ECT produces.

If psychic experiences can be detached from context and turned into pathological symptoms, then cures and treatments can be marketed.

Meanwhile, *The West Australian* (November 28 2009) reveals that Western Australia is seeking to ban the use of ECT on children less than 16 years of age. Under a Freedom of Information request it was revealed that 'fewer than five' 11–15 year-olds received the treatment, and a now withdrawn procedure manual from Graylands Hospital 'warned staff that once the ECT machine was turned on it was "as lethal as a loaded gun"'.

Both ECT and psychotropic medications raise a host of complex ethical issues. There are issues to do with consent and with the consequences when a society decides to invest in the state or its agents the power to involuntarily drug or shock a patient, supposedly in their own interest. How can it be determined that it is in the interests of a child or elderly person to receive particular drugs, or ECT? Why do we assume that persons with particular psychiatric difficulties are incapable of making an informed decision about their own treatment? How do we draw a line

What are we to make of the 500 Australian children under five, including forty-eight babies, who are receiving anti-depressant medications?

between ‘psychiatric treatment’, which is what putatively happens in Australian and American psychiatric hospitals, and punishment of the kind that occurs in China, where internet-addicted adolescents may be shocked, and in Turkey where, according to UNICEF, children as young as nine years of age are subjected to ECT without the benefit of anaesthesia? What happens if those with authority in society come to define normality in ways that exclude groups of people who then need to be shocked into conformity either because of their behaviour or their espoused views? Where do we draw the line between the kinds of dissidents in the old Soviet Gulag or in contemporary China, neither of which is a stranger to uses of psychiatric treatment as punishment, and the treatment of persons for whom similar ‘treatments’ are offered for supposedly ‘therapeutic benefit’? Who grants the right to shock children who are catatonic or autistic in order to bring them back to the psychic world we believe they ought to live in?

The emergent psychiatric survivor movement offers one answer by challenging the god-like powers of governments and the psychiatric establishment through setting up self-help movements around the world to help psychiatric survivors chart the course of their own wellness on their own terms—terms encapsulated in survivor movement nomenclature such as Mad Pride, MindFreedom, and The Hearing Voices Network.

The crux of the matter here, as Robert Whitaker made clear in *Mad in America*, is that the psychiatric establishment, pharmaceutical companies (‘Big Pharma’) and ECT device makers have combined forces to construct a notion of psychiatric dis-order (potentially incorporating plain nonconformity and orneriness) that is medicalised and pathologising. If, as John Read notes in *Models of Madness*, we construe psychic or emotional difficulty as biological, and hence as a disease (as opposed to as an experience of *psychic disease*), then inevitably the solution that is called for is a medical/ technological solution. Psychiatry, Big Pharma and device makers then ride to the rescue and reap the billions in profits that such treatments generate. While ECT is a rather crude tool—a blunt instrument—the sophistication and reach of the psychiatric establishment should not be underestimated. I will look at two aspects to illustrate.

The Pathologisation of the Everyday

Recent books by Peter Conrad (*The Medicalization of Society*), Allan Horwitz and Jerome Wakefield (*The Loss of Sadness*) and Christopher Lane (*Shyness: How Normal Behavior Becomes a Sickness*) reveal the power of pharmaceutical advertising to turn everyday aspects of psychic experience into disorders. If psychic experiences can be detached from context and turned into pathological symptoms, then cures and treatments can be marketed. The biologisation of psychic events shifts the focus away from the mind, and towards the brain. If the brain needs to be rewired, or if the chemicals in our brains need to be re-ordered, then psychotropic medications or shock treatment is in order. Psychosurgery, a neurobiological intervention, for example, is re-emerging as a treatment for schizophrenia, raising the spectre of the return of the appalling tragedy lobotomies produced.

In this type of culture, ideas about disorder can be driven by the types of demands highlighted in what had seemed to be science fiction: a ‘Brave New World’ in which societal convenience can masquerade as ‘care’ or empathic concern. What, for example, is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)? Does such a disorder really exist? Why has the diagnosis of ADHD increased astronomically in recent years? Now that the market for ADHD drugs has been saturated in the United States, there is a shift to childhood bipolar disorder as the diagnosis du jour. Does it matter that Dr Joseph Biederman of Harvard, who almost single-handedly

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shifted the focus of child psychiatry to bipolar disorder and increased the use of a paediatric bipolar diagnosis forty fold in ten years, has taken millions of dollars from Big Pharma?

Pharmaceutical advertising follows the path of all advertising in defining norms and peddling products to enable us to approximate a predefined notion of normality. If shyness or sadness, for example, is no longer normal, but is a symptom of a disorder or abnormality, then people can be trained to reflexively seek relief through a palliative such as a pill. Big Pharma benefits from cultivating the belief that it is no longer a normal part of the human condition to experience depression, angst, loss, anxiety, boredom, terror, psychosis or despair for longer than it takes to pop a pill. If the pills don't work there is always ECT. Apart from the fearsome side-effects of ECT and the many psychotropic medications that are peddled, particularly the anti-psychotic medications that are now being offered untested to children, there is the greater issue of the effects on human subjectivity when our emotional repertoire is so narrowed that we cannot live in and with our experience but must instantly seek to insulate ourselves from the psychic experiences that make us fully human. Furthermore, pills and shocks cause us to retreat into existential isolation instead of seeking out the comfort of fellow humans and the embrace of cultural beliefs and practices that might enable us to regain a sense of connection and purpose.

The Globalisation of the American Psyche

In his forthcoming book *Crazy Like Us? The Globalization of the American Psyche* (excerpted in *The New York Times*, January 10 2010), Ethan Watters traces a rapid shift in global understandings of mental disorder. Watters acknowledges how particular beliefs about suffering are shaped by culture. Such folk beliefs are highly adaptive, he suggests, in helping communities assist their members in managing moments of exquisite suffering of the kind that Westerners would recognise, for example, as psychosis or mental breakdown. Watters notes that Western notions of suffering are rapidly supplanting local folk understandings and the wisdom and practices of shamans and local healers are being replaced by Western psychiatric treatments, by dissemination of dominant culture knowledge over the internet and, inevitably, by consumer advertising of psychotropic medications.

The villain of the piece, Watters suggests, is the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) promulgated by the American Psychiatric Association. The DSM is a compilation of symptoms. A clinician is meant to assess a patient along a series of dimensions and, based on the relative frequency of certain dispositions, behaviours, or symptoms, produce a classification or diagnosis. The DSM is based on a biological notion of psychic suffering. Instead of seeking to understand the person's suffering on their terms, and in relation to the events of their

Is it too much to ask that mental health workers think locally, respond in humanitarian and interested ways, and respect the agency and choices of a suffering person

life narrative, a pseudo-objective diagnosis is established and this typically leads to a medical course of treatment. Watters maintains, and I agree, that depression, PTSD and schizophrenia are influenced by cultural beliefs. The biological model medicalises human experience, distances the psychiatrist from the sufferer, and insists on seeing distress produced by certain forms of experience as an objective illness rather than a product of culture, circumstances and personal narrative. This leads to the hegemony of Western notions of being and Western understandings of illness. It also privileges individualist, capitalist forms of treatment that detach people from community supposedly in the interests of their psychic wellness. The Western world may have shifted away from asylums, but sufferers of psychic distress are still denied agency and voice and are often coerced or lured into treatments that atomize, falsely universalise, pathologise and objectify human experience. While this is undoubtedly problematic for persons of European origin, it is even more so for those who come from communities other than the dominant culture. For Indigenous persons in Australia, already experiencing cultural oppression and assimilative pressures in all other aspects of their lives, this is yet another assault on their capacities to maintain traditions, build community, and connect with ancestral lifeways.

Liberation Psychiatry: Oxymoron or Possibility?

The writings of Paulo Freire and Ignacio Martín-Baro, and the local practices of shamans and healers in different parts of the world, give me hope that persons who experience psychic distress can live empowered and respected lives, cherished in their

communities, and assisted in managing their suffering and finding paths of hope. Perhaps the most difficult step is to resist normativity. The psychiatric survivor movements show that this is possible, but how one can do it within the context of psychiatric treatment is not clear to me. I recall Ellyn Saks, author of *The Center Cannot Hold*, explaining how, in the midst of a severe psychotic episode, she had to feign normality or she feared she would be kept in the psychiatric hospital indefinitely, brutally strapped to a gurney and stuffed with pills whenever she grew agitated. I find it helpful to remember that what we call symptoms have origins, and that every patient, adult or child, has a story. Every life comes out of a context and distress can only be understood in terms of pre-existing history, ancestral history and cultural beliefs. Rather than universal models and universal treatments, is it too much to ask that mental health workers think locally, respond in humanitarian and interested ways, and respect the agency and choices of a suffering person whether that person is psychotic, angry, delusional, catatonic or merely desperate? If at the moment the person presents with such symptoms could we not respond with patience and love? Is this not even more necessary when the patient is a toddler or young child, or, for that matter, a 97-year-old woman?

It is rather frightening to me that we are reaching the point in our world where people seek out shock treatment and pills for themselves or their children rather than seeking to understand the human narrative that necessarily underlies all suffering. I suspect that the psychiatric survivor movement has it right, and that things will only change when the civil rights of all persons, children and adults, delusional and non-delusional, mad and less mad, can be asserted. That, no doubt will be a struggle, because the forces allied against it are potent, entrenched and wealthy, but it is a cause well worth fighting for. Within a hegemonic capitalist and Westernised medical system, the psychiatric establishment is self-interested and seems perfectly rational. Viewed from the perspective of what Martin Buber calls an I-Thou relationship, or from within the context of embedded indigenous epistemologies, it could however be regarded as severely grandiose, megalomaniacal, and self-deluding. Aspects of establishment psychiatry are truly shocking! 

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Shock Me Please,
I'm Crazy

Michael O'Loughlin

→→→

Environmental Practices at Arena Printing

Our Environmental Commitment

We believe that sustaining the world around us is vital to everyone's future.

We are committed to environmentally responsible printing and have clear procedures in place to achieve this. These are regularly reviewed to ensure they are up to date.

In choosing Arena, you can be sure your printed products will be responsibly produced.

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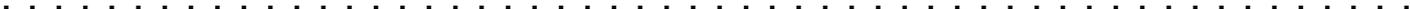


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Social Housing or
Private Profit?

Joanne Knight

Joanne Knight works
in homelessness
advocacy in the
community sector in
Melbourne.



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Social Housing or Private Profit?

Joanne Knight

Public–private partnerships in Rudd’s new housing affordability scheme offer developers more than they offer the poor

The Rudd government introduced the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) in 2009 purportedly to increase the supply of affordable housing. However, the Australian economy as a whole is dependent on housing prices remaining inflated to maintain land values and to finance the system of consumer debt. Housing prices sit at seven times the average annual wage. Consumers remain in debt as a lifestyle and the government props up the housing market with grants and tax breaks. Thus a significant minority of people are in continuous housing stress.

The House Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth’s *Inquiry into Homelessness Legislation* reported in November that a 17 per cent increase in family homelessness and a 10 per cent increase in adult homelessness between the 2001 and 2006 censuses reflect issues associated with a decline in affordable housing and the private rental market. The definition of homelessness in the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act includes people who are at risk of eviction because their house or flat is too expensive. With 22.5 per cent of Australian households in housing stress (spending more than 30 per cent of their household income on housing and household debt) in 2005–06, and household debt increasing from \$795 billion in June 2006 (RBA) to around \$1.1 trillion in September 2008 (ABS), it seems that a growing number of people may fall under this definition. The number of Australians at risk of homelessness may number in the millions rather than the official figure of 105,000.

Now the homelessness sector is failing significantly to meet the increasing demand placed on it. The Salvation Army’s Crisis Housing Service says that it is seeing increasing numbers of middle class people who need crisis accommodation. Wesley Homelessness Services says that the Transitional Housing system is so clogged that people must stay in crisis accommodation in motels for months before they can move to transitional housing and there is simply nowhere for many people to go except back to the streets or horrendous boarding houses.

Figures only give us a partial picture. When people fall into homelessness they can approach a homelessness service. If they are a family and the service has funds, they may be placed in a motel. Anyone who saw the confronting *Four Corners* program ‘Last Chance Motel’ will understand the nightmare this presents for families: living in one room together, unable to cook, to have privacy, nowhere for the kids to play. So to be faced with the prospect of living this way for months at a time is a recipe for despair. This is now the reality for the homeless who are lucky enough to get placed. Wesley Homelessness Services sees 350–400 clients per month, placing twelve in transitional housing in 2009. There is a real problem.

Under the NRAS, the Commonwealth Government has pledged funds to support the development of 3000 dwellings in Victoria. The NRAS offers an annual National Rental Incentive of \$6000 per dwelling per year

refundable tax offset or payment and the State or Territory Government Incentive of \$2000 per dwelling per year in direct or in kind financial support for a period of ten years. Participants include private land developers, real estate agents, non-profit organisations and local government, who will receive these payments in return for supplying dwellings to be rented at least 20 per cent below the market rate to eligible low and moderate income households.

The number of Australians at risk of homelessness may number in the millions rather than the official figure of 105,000.

Tenants who are eligible for the Scheme are those who qualify for rent assistance because they receive income support payments or Family Tax Benefit Part A, regardless of their housing affordability situation. The maximum incomes of those eligible range from \$39,000 for a single age pensioner to \$80,000 for a working family with three children under twelve. The dwellings will be managed by a Tenancy Manager, which would include private landlords and real estate agents. They will be subject to reporting requirements in relation to tenancy selection and management and continuing compliance.

Unfortunately according to the Victorian government Office of Housing these funds would need to be provided for ten consecutive years to clear the public housing waiting list. In Victoria the waiting list grows ever longer, increasing from 34,500 families in 2006 to more 39,000 and somewhere around 200,000 Australia-wide. The inadequacy of the scheme is hidden behind rhetoric which draws on the nation-building of the past—home ownership, the Australian Dream—but the times have changed. Today governments are too much in league with business to ever be able to provide housing as a social need rather than a commodity.

In a speech last year RBA Governor Glenn Stevens explained the way that speculation sets the price of housing rather than need. He argued that rents were rising at a rate higher than the CPI because there was strong demand for rental accommodation, and rents as a yield to the supplier had been unusually low. Earlier in the decade, Stevens explained, housing prices were increasing fast and capital gains returns were good, thus rents remained low. As housing price increases slowed, however, so did capital gains, so investors needed to increase returns. They did this by raising

rents quickly. (Just prior to this, the Real Estate Institute and the Property Council of Australia conducted a media campaign ‘predicting’ large rent rises.)

We have a housing system where either rents need to be high or prices need to be increasing for stakeholders (that is developers, real estate agents and investors) to be satisfied, resulting, not surprisingly, in unaffordable housing. By its own logic this system will never deliver sufficient affordable housing for everyone.

Stevens went on to argue that higher interest rates will eventually slow demand, and in due course it will get more difficult to raise prices. This does not seem to have been born out over the last twelve to eighteen months. In the June 2009 quarter, house prices rose 4.2 per cent and, in the September quarter, the housing affordability index dropped 3.3 per cent. The sting in the tail is that higher interest rates mean greater housing stress and increases in homelessness.

The Rudd government’s feted stimulus package with its raft of housing grants for first home buyers and tax concessions has kept housing prices high, according to Professor Julian Disney. Real Estate Institute of Australia president David Airey announced that prices are rising because the number of first home buyers has increased from 15 per cent of all new home loans to 27 per cent, which has led to competition with investors for properties. Speculators, of course, like a bit of healthy competition. It keeps the market ‘buoyant’.

If the purpose of the NRAS is to bring down the price of housing, this will undermine the housing market which is based on attracting investors and developers into the market to make a short-term profit. These stakeholders have an interest in ensuring housing prices remain as high as possible. The paradox is that to attract private investment to build more houses to maintain supply, we need high house prices and high rents. This pushes everyone on a normal income out of the market, and creates more homelessness and housing stress. The only way that housing can be made more affordable is if the government, that is the taxpayer, foots the bill for the profits of developers, real estate agents and investors.

Other criticisms are made of the NRAS which further illustrate the problem of the public–private approach of Rudd’s housing policies. For one, ACOSS has grave concerns that the proposed system of valuations raises the potential for manipulation or inconsistency. There is a high likelihood that real estate agents and speculators will increase their rents on NRAS properties to accommodate the subsidies, thus undermining the purpose of the scheme. ACOSS suggests that market rents should be set by reference to area median rents. But if rents are already inflated and rising as a result of market mechanisms—read speculation—this will do very little. The purpose of the housing market is profit and speculation, not the provision of social services.

Further, the NRAS subsidy will increase annually in line with the rent component of the CPI. Given the

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Social Housing or
Private Profit?

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So who carries the fire? What forms of collective belief and practice are in touch with and nourished by the deeper sources of truth, goodness and beauty that can guide our responses to the sustainability emergency?

expectation of continued rent increases, predicted in January this year as between 5 and 7 per cent by Australian Property Monitors, the level of assistance to developers provided by government increases continuously. The quantity of government money being gobbled up by voracious developers will mushroom out of control.

Another problem with the NRAS is that it will probably not assist as many people out of housing stress as is being claimed. Dr Rachel Ong and Professor Gavin Wood from the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) have analysed the potential impact of the NRAS. They found that 11,512 households of 50,000 randomly selected eligible households were above the 30 per cent benchmark (30 per cent of household income being spent on housing and household debt). Of these, only 4,614 (40 per cent) would be brought below the 30 per cent benchmark after their rent was reduced by 20 per cent.

This situation worsens when looking at the poorest 20 per cent of households, where rates of housing stress are extremely high at 54 per cent of household income. The NRAS lowers average net housing costs to 34 per cent of income for these households. Barely one in four of the poorest households would be actually lifted out of housing stress. The NRAS is less effective in reducing rates of housing stress because the net housing costs of the poorest 20 per cent of NRAS eligible tenants are more likely to be markedly above the 30 per cent affordability threshold. AHURI has recommended that targeting the NRAS to lower-income households, rather than a random allocation to rent assistance-eligible households, would improve the Scheme's capacity to alleviate the housing affordability circumstances of a larger number of households. As we have seen with public housing waiting lists, restricting access ends up in a blow-out in demand. As the market fails more people, increasing numbers of people are forced to seek access to the Scheme.

Conveniently, the NRAS could also be a means of cutting government expenditure. AHURI points out that one of the 'rarely mentioned' potential policy benefits of the NRAS is that it could create savings in rent assistance expenditure. Rent assistance payment rules could see some reductions in the amount paid to NRAS tenants. AHURI's modelling estimates that rent assistance payments could be reduced by \$21 million or 5 per cent. Unfortunately for the government, these 'savings are somewhat smaller than might have been anticipated' because 37 per cent of rent assistance recipients eligible for the NRAS

continue to receive the same amount of rent assistance after the rent discount. ACOSS points out that if some tenants are ineligible for rent assistance or receive reduced payments they may be worse off under the NRAS. Again, this suggests that such public-private arrangements really do very little for creating affordable housing for people on low incomes.

Security of tenure remains an issue under the scheme. According to ACOSS, the NRAS does not provide tenants with longer leases or additional rights beyond those required by relevant landlord and tenant legislation. Dwellings occupied by very disadvantaged or high-needs households are more likely to need support to sustain their tenancies. Without that support, even if low-income and high needs households are given priority access to housing, they may be unable to sustain tenancies for extended periods. ACOSS raises doubts about the capacity of real estate agents to operate this type of housing. There is a real danger of these properties becoming hot spots for social problems and for the same people to continue to circulate through the homelessness system. Additionally, there is a genuine risk that, after ten years, private developers will simply sell off the stock and collect the capital gains, returning the housing stock to the open market and making a healthy profit.

A system where profit and speculation fix the supply and value of housing and where the government attempts to regulate this through indirect macroeconomic measures has resulted in housing that fewer and fewer people can afford to buy and rents that leave a large section of the population in housing stress and in danger of homelessness. People treat the housing market as a strange unpredictable beast, struggling to understand or calculate its next move. With increasing interest rates, many are now in danger of getting their heads bitten off. The government's NRAS will do little to influence this monstrosity. In fact, I suspect, as with most PPPs, the government will simply end up paying out twice as much to private interests and the same people will continue to find themselves circulating through the merry-go-round of the housing system. **■**

Who Will Carry the Fire?

Ian Barns

The 'sustainability emergency' and sources for a re-enchantment of the world

A 2007 report on climate change policy by David Spratt and Phillip Sutton, *Climate Code Red*, has as its sub-title 'The Case for a Sustainability Emergency'. To speak of a 'sustainability emergency' is a very useful way of re-framing policy development not only in relation to climate change, but also oil depletion, pervasive ecological destruction and other serious socio-environmental challenges. In particular it resists the easy cooption to business-as-usual politics that has been the fate of terms such as 'sustainable development' and 'sustainability'. It's a lot harder to ignore the imperative for urgent, systemic change when having to deal with a sustainability emergency.

However its proving to be very difficult for Spratt and Sutton—and many others like James Hansen and Al Gore—to convince national communities and their leaders that, without drastic changes to the way we live, the world is heading towards a time of unprecedented catastrophe. The warnings of disaster presented in the growing body of technical and scientific research don't really capture our imagination. They seem too remote, too abstract, and hard to take seriously.

Perhaps that's why in his regular *Guardian* column in October 2007 George Monbiot described the recent novel by Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, as the most important environmental book ever written. It dramatised in a way that volumes of scientific research could not, the kind of world our reckless ecological overshoot is likely to produce.

The Road tells a story about a father and son travelling by foot down what was once an inter-state highway in the southern states of the United States. It is now some ten years after what seems to have been a nuclear exchange that resulted in a catastrophic nuclear winter that effectively destroyed the systems of life on the planet: plants, trees, animals. Only a few humans remain. The son was born around the time of this nuclear apocalypse. Unable to face life in the nightmare world that followed, the mother committed suicide, but the father lived on, determined to protect and care for his son. The few people still living are engaged in a desperate attempt to stay alive, to find food and to avoid being killed and eaten by others. Thus, not only is there no biotic life to support them, there is also no society, no caring community, no protective institutions.

Industrial modernity has ingrained in us a belief in human exceptionalism: that we humans somehow stand above and apart from the wider natural world.

The man and boy are travelling down the road in the hope that they can reach the sea, where they hope that it will be warmer. They survive by scavenging the detritus of a lost civilisation, lucky to stumble across caches of food that have been missed by others involved in the same desperate quest. In constant fear of being spotted by bands of cannibals, they are always on the move, desperate to find shelters to hide them from others. The man is resourceful and his son trusting. What is so moving about this story is the love they share: 'each is the other's world entire'.

The Road can be read not just as a dreadful depiction of a post-apocalyptic world but also as a meditation on the spiritual condition of our present late modern culture that is propelling us into a sustainability emergency. Such a reading is supported when we consider the possible thematic connection between *The Road* and McCarthy's earlier novel *No Country for Old Men*, recently adapted to the screen by the Coen brothers. It seemed to me that, notwithstanding the very different situations described in the two novels, that there was a parallel between the baleful environment in *The Road* and the remorseless killer, Anton Chigurh, in *No Country for Old Men*. With his callous

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Ian Barns

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indifference, his relentless efficiency and frightening power, Anton, like Mary Shelley's monster in *Frankenstein*, becomes a metaphor for the moral nihilism at the very heart of the commodified, violent and nature-degrading world that we are in the process of creating.

By and large, we moderns still believe in progress. Industrial modernity has ingrained in us a belief in human exceptionalism: that we humans somehow stand above and apart from the wider natural world. Our civilisation continues to be inspired by Francis Bacon's dream that through Newton's science we should become masters and possessors of nature. The unfolding of this Baconian dream in the many and varied branches of modern techno-science has brought enormous material benefits to humanity by accessing the hidden resources of the natural world to lift people out of hunger and poverty, and by controlling diseases that have been the scourge of humankind from time immemorial. The affluence of our material civilisation has freed us to spend more time in education, artistic creativity and the many and diverse forms of social life: to flourish as human beings in ways that our ancestors could only dream about.

A robust moral self-confidence still animates life and politics in modern Western societies. Our generally shared code is that of a liberal humanism, with the freedom, rights and dignity of individual persons as its core values. We are the good guys, as distinct from sundry bad guys. We believe in and practise democracy, the rule of law, freedom of speech, cultural and religious diversity; we care about the poor and a measure of social justice; and we aspire to protect the natural environment.

However, the looming sustainability emergency forces us to look beyond all of these positive blessings and to recognise the ultimately pathological nature of the Baconian dream. It is a dream that trains us to treat the wider natural world as merely 'stuff' to be used more or less as we see fit. Despite the protests of ecologists, romantic naturalists and indigenous peoples, we urban industrial moderns frame the natural world in predominantly utilitarian and anthropocentric terms: its value to us. Whilst more primitive cultures have treated the natural world respectfully as a sacred canopy for their lives, Baconian modernity has desecralised nature, reducing it to 'standing reserve': as something that could be exploited for resources, remade according to human convenience and a repository for ever growing waste.

Secondly, the Baconian dream is pathological in its utopianism with respect to human possibilities. Rather than recognising that human life is to be lived within the limits of nature, it has encouraged us to believe that we can progressively transform ourselves and overcome our limits through continued prosthetic innovations. According to David Noble and others, this utopianism has deep roots in the eschatological dreaming of millennial Christianity: the belief that humans were destined to transcend the limits of nature and attain immortality and divinity. In secular modernity, however, this destiny is not realised by the graceful act of God, but through technology. Ironically, the closer our civilisation comes to realising this technological dream the more problematic it becomes as our humanness itself becomes technologised: not just in terms of being immersed in a milieu of complex machines and systems, but also in the soft technologies of social discipline and the increasingly scientific terms in which we seek to understand ourselves. Tragically, there seems to be an inverse relationship between our power to remake ourselves through technology, and our moral formation as virtuous human beings.

Thirdly, for all of its benign intention, as the Baconian dream becomes a reality, its ultimately violent character becomes apparent, in part because of its objectifying and instrumentalising trajectory, such that the world becomes the stuff of wilful control and manipulation. At root there is an amoral arbitrariness about the

modern Baconian project, such that, as theologian Oliver O'Donovan puts it, even the good, the true and the beautiful become matters of wilful human choice. Yet more deeply, it seems to be a project that unleashes or amplifies a primal violence into the world. For all of its noble intent the most deadly fruit of the Baconian project has been the emergence of nation-states militarised to an extraordinary degree and equipped with weaponry that beggars belief.

The renewal of religious belief and practice has been welcomed by many as contributing to the re-enchantment of the natural world and for the fostering of a deeper spiritual regard for both nature and humanity.

Yet as well as providing a vivid metaphor for the nihilism of late modern culture, does McCarthy's *The Road* also provide us with any glimmer of hope about our moral capacity to respond to the sustainability emergency? I believe it does. In both *The Road* and *No Country for Old Men* there is a clear moral centre: characters who tenaciously hold onto a sense of the good in the midst of the mayhem around them. In *No Country*, it's the old sheriff, Ed Tom Bell, who grieves over the surge of violence and does his best to protect 'his people'. In *The Road*, an extraordinary bond of love exists between father and son. The goodness and love that these characters (especially the young boy) embody is fragile, always on the verge of being extinguished, but resilient nonetheless. The stories ask us to think about the question: where in such a world does this kind of goodness and love come from?

McCarthy hints at an answer with the image of 'carrying the fire'. This image appears at the end of *No Country for Old Men*. Newly retired as sheriff, Ed Tom sits at the breakfast table with his wife. He tells her of two dreams he had had about his father the previous night. He couldn't remember much about the first one.

But the second one it was like we was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through the mountains of a night. Goin through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he [his father] rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothin. He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carrying fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the colour of the moon. And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere in all that dark and all that cold and I knew whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up.

The image of 'carrying the fire' appears several times in *The Road*. One night they slept in an old car beneath an overpass.

He [the man] woke in the night and lay listening. He couldn't remember where he was. The thought made him smile. Where are we? he said.

What is it Papa?

Nothing. We're okay. Go to sleep.

We're going to be okay, aren't we Papa?

Yes. We are.

And nothing bad is going to happen to us.

That's right.

Because we're carrying the fire.

Yes. Because we're carrying the fire.

The man is suffering from terminal damage to his lungs. Yet he is determined to keep going for the sake of his son. Nevertheless he reaches a point where he knows he cannot keep going. Dying, he tells his son

You need to go on, he said. I can't go with you. You need to keep going. You don't know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You'll be lucky again, You'll see. Just go. It's all right.

I can't.

It's all right. This has been a long time coming. Now it's here. Keep going south.

What is 'the fire' that keeps the good guys going—the kind of 'fire' that will be needed to deal with the impending sustainability emergency?

For most of us, in the still prevalent tradition of ethical humanism, 'the fire' is the resilient human spirit, capable of responding to times of privation and social disaster with courage, common purpose and love. As the words of the man to his son seem to imply, it is something innate, part of what it means to be a human self.

So who carries the fire? What forms of collective belief and practice are in touch with and nourished by the deeper sources of truth, goodness and beauty that can guide our responses to the sustainability emergency?

Jacques Monod, the Nobel Prize-winning French molecular biologist expresses this ethical heroism in clear and stark terms:

If he [humankind] accepts this message [the message that science has irrevocably destroyed any belief in objective moral meaning and purpose in nature], man must at last wake out of his millenary dream and discover his total solitude, his fundamental isolation. He must realize that, like a gypsy, he lives on the boundaries of an alien world; a world that is deaf to his music, and as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his suffering and crimes.

Disdainful of the failure of Western cultures to face up to the truth of humanity's cosmic situation, Monod writes that 'The liberal societies of the West still pay lip-service to, and present as a basis for morality, a disgusting farrago of Judeo-Christian religiosity, scientific progressivism, belief in the "natural" rights of man, and utilitarian pragmatism.'

Such ethical humanism is actually part of the problem. The stripping away of meaning and purpose in the natural world results in it becoming 'stuff' that we recklessly exploit and our high view of the human person has been progressively reconstructed in scientific and technological terms; so that rather than overcoming a 'sickness of the spirit' resulting from

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Mainstream discussions of resurgent religion still generally assume the primacy of the secular in politics, economics, the academy, the professions and the media. However recognition of the constitutive importance of the sacred brings this assumption into question. It's not just a matter of acknowledging that religious belief and practice are here to stay, but also of laying bare the covert or disguised religiosity of our seemingly secular world—that secular modernity itself has involved not so much the displacement of the sacred but its re-organisation and re-expression. Many have pointed out that modernity is still powerfully shaped by the antecedent culture of Christianity and indeed can be understood as a secularised form of Christianity, manifest in key ideas of progress and the sanctity of all human persons. Writers, such as David Noble in *The Religion of Technology* and John Gray in *Black Mass*, have argued that the utopian and millennialist character of post-Enlightenment modernity is derived directly from a Christian vision of the world. Dealing with the spiritual grammar of secular modernity and its connection to Christianity is thus a crucial and central element of the renewal of religion in our late modern world. For some, it is Christianity itself that is ultimately responsible for the pathological condition of modern times because of its disenchanting trajectory. For others, modernity's heretical replacement of Christianity's God by a Promethean humanity has been the problem.

So who carries the fire? What forms of collective belief and practice are in touch with and nourished by the deeper sources of truth, goodness and beauty that can guide our responses to the sustainability emergency? It is not my purpose to advocate any particular religious tradition, but simply to propose that the challenge of sustainability needs to be re-framed within the context of religious narration and argument. One of the virtues of Taylor's approach is that he opens up the space within which that can happen. Whilst on the one hand he argues that human life and selfhood is constituted within a framework of transcendental meanings, he also

stresses that these meanings are mediated through particular narratives, practices and forms of life. Human knowledge of the divine is not immediate and spontaneous, or at least not sustainably so. To sustain the knowledge of the divine requires a set of liturgical practices, spiritual disciplines and interpretive skill—and a willingness to provide an account of one's particular vision of the sacred.

In the context of religious responses to the sustainability emergency, a spirit of dialogue and conversation between new and old forms of belief and practice may emerge. The new and extraordinary challenges of planetary overload may, hopefully, provide a positive catalyst for religiously defined communities to re-articulate their different visions of god, of the meaning and purpose of reality, and of humanity's role within the natural world in a humble and dialogical way.

One of the interesting aspects of McCarthy's story is the way it foregrounds the man's technical resourcefulness and inventiveness. He and the boy are able to survive because of the way in which he makes good use of detritus of a lost industrial civilisation. It reminded me of a similar theme in Kunstler's *Long Emergency*: that in the radically downscaled post-industrial world on the coming years, there will be a lot of 'stuff' around that will provide a significant resource for the human world that will emerge.

Such images point to the fact that the continuation of human society will necessarily involve a great deal of human creativity and human inventiveness: not the loss of knowledge and a return to superstition, but the appropriation and redirection of that knowledge within a deeper sense of that Creator God who sustains all things and provides meaning and hope for all of His creatures. **a**

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Ian Barns

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The China Run

Roland Boer

Roland Boer is a writer who lives in Newcastle.

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The China Run

Roland Boer

Surprises and neighbourly negotiations as our author travels modern China

Sterile white body suits, swimming goggles, face-masks, heavy boots and rubber gloves—six figures dressed as though they were entering a space craft or perhaps a laboratory with a highly contagious disease. Any plane from Australia, a swine flu hotspot (it was 2009), was always going to be suspect. They came on board after we had landed in Shanghai, passing through the plane in pairs. One zapped my forehead and, since doubt persisted, the other gently placed a thermometer in my mouth. I was cleared. But not so a grey-haired woman on the other side of the plane from where I was sitting; she gave a high reading.

Immediately the white-suited disease troops sprang into action. Two rows on all sides of her were handed facemasks (three rows in Hong Kong). We had to wait half an hour for an official to come along; forms were filled out and signed and the infected party was marched off for quarantine.

One of them said, 'I bet we're not staying where we thought we would tonight.'

Another replied, 'Yeah, I hope they have plenty of grog where we're going.'

The woman next to me said, 'Why didn't she take a panadol half an hour before landing?'

Welcome to China!

Bicycles

I had wanted to come to China, the real China, for a long time. With more and more translations of my writings and talks of lecture tours the time was overdue. And I had arrived in the port city of Shanghai. I wasn't overwhelmed by the size of the port (it has the highest volume of goods traded of any port in the world), nor was I overwhelmed by the haze or the size of the city (with a population almost equal to Australia's 21 million). What blew me away were the bicycles.

Any city without masses of bicycles is a sad, sad place—like most cities in Australia. On this criterion, Shanghai is overflowing with joy. The wide bicycle lanes on all streets cannot hold the sheer number of bikes and motor scooters. They flow out onto the main roadway, in amongst the endless trucks and taxis, up on footpaths, the wrong way on bike lanes—anywhere you can get a bicycle. Some people haul mountainous loads—piles of fresh water, furniture, fridges, tools, building materials and whatever needs to be moved—on sturdy machines. In fact, tradesmen ride bicycles rather than utes. Others ride fold-up bicycles with miniature wheels. Some look like they were made before the Maoist Revolution. Others have obviously come off the factory line yesterday. Often there are two on a bicycle and no-one wears a helmet.

I was mesmerised by the intersections. Where traffic lights are present, cars and trucks stop (except for those turning left and the odd red-light runner). But not the bicycles, pedestrians or motor-scooters; they continue as if the red lights were in another universe. In their universe, the one of bicycles and people on foot, they carry on weaving in and out of one another, except that now the cars and trucks came at right angles to their own direction. It was as though those vehicles bearing down on them from right and left simply did not exist. I watched one man caught in a maelstrom of traffic, which collectively tried to deafen him with their horns. He was so indignant—swearing and gesturing—at the very presumption that cars should even think about cutting off his progress across the intersection.

I constantly expected to hear terrifying collisions, bodies spread-eagled across the road, and bicycles crushed under trucks. Somehow, against all the silly and pointless road rules with which I am familiar, the traffic manages. It is a mass of horns, swerving cars, tail-gating trucks, aggressive buses, foolhardy pedestrians, and cyclists in their own universe. Seat-belts are treated as amusing decorations and helmets are left to the timid. Yet somehow, some way, they all get to their destinations without mishap. Or I assume they do.

Close Encounters

Shanghai is a city full of people out running at 5.30 am. By 6.30 am the trucks travel in convoys through the streets. Not small delivery trucks, but semi-trailers full of building materials and soil from excavations. Building projects have, I was told, slowed down in the last few years, but everywhere I looked I saw cranes, bulldozers, backhoes, earth-movers, and of course the trucks. I heard the sounds of jackhammers, power-drills and saws. People are busting to get on with everything. It is a city full of energy.

I had not come to China merely to gape at intersection antics and marvel at the bicycles. I was here to talk to a press that is translating one of my books and a professor of biblical studies who showed me his bum crack. Having slept off the flight's sleeping tablets, I was out early, dodging bicycles, motor scooters and trucks, to make my way to VI Horae Press on Jiangsu Road. Lisa, or He Hua (prefixed by a 'Ms'; as she told me clearly in an early email) was my main contact and we came to know each other quite well over the next couple of days. On greeting me for the first time in the flesh, she said she hadn't recognised me at first. Obviously, I thought, since we'd never actually met, but the reason was not quite what I had imagined.

'All the Australians I have met have red faces,' she said. 'So I didn't recognise you at first.' I imagined beefy, meat-eating Australians descending upon China, especially those who had spent too much time in the sun while working on their high blood pressure.

Lisa was from northern China, had studied English at university and had moved to Shanghai to work at the press. Lisa had no car, like most people, lived simply, and enjoyed life immensely.

‘Do you like poetry?’ she asked me.

‘I’m very choosy’, I replied, but we talked for ages about poetry.

‘I also love music’, she said.

‘Me too’, I said, ‘Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds ...’

She gave me a sceptical look.

‘I bet you like classical music’, I said.

‘Oh yes’, she said. ‘And I love Shakespeare and Russian novels, especially Tolstoy.’

I could agree there, at least on the Russian novels. I mentioned China Miéville and Kim Stanley Robinson, who are not so Russian.

I was fascinated by the way she wrote in Chinese. The way the ideograms are constructed, much like a piece of furniture, can be an art. Lisa confessed to another love, calligraphy, and spoke endlessly about the great Chinese calligraphers. I thought about my spider-scrawl handwriting and kept asking her to write sentences and explain them to me.

But Lisa also became my translator at Horae Press, since Ni, the chief editor, could understand English but not speak it so much. Better than my understanding of Chinese, I pointed out. I had dressed up mildly for the meeting with Ni, expecting a middle-aged man in a business suit and official manner who would ceremoniously hand me his business card. On this sweltering June day I wore long pants and a button-up shirt, and I was sweating freely by the time I arrived at the press.

I needn’t have bothered, for as soon as I met Ni I realised I was over-dressed. Dirty jeans, black T-shirt, greying goatee, ponytail and beaten up baseball cap. He stubbed out a cigarette into an over-flowing ashtray as I walked in. More of an ageing rock-star than the CEO of an energetic and busy press.

‘We want to be the number one publisher of theological books in ten years’, he told me through Lisa.

Ni had initially allocated an hour and a half for my visit, but soon enough we hit it off. He took Lisa and me to lunch, with Lisa explaining all the terms for drinks and food and where they came from. I had opted for Rose-flower tea, whose name (which escapes me) alluded to the broken-hearted goddess who threw herself into a river when her lover disappeared. Very manly, I thought to myself. We talked about theology, Germans, Ni’s experience with a large state publisher before he set up VI Horae, the multi-layered meaning of VI Horae (6 hours), the books on his desk, my other books, food, the state of biblical studies, China, lecture tours, Australia, travel, and Ni kept offering me smokes. Lisa was worn out by the end of it, but Ni wanted to meet again the following morning and talk some more. By the end of it I had agreed to become a consultant to the press on translations and to send him a pile of my own books as well.

As we parted, I observed that China may well lead the world

in theology in a hundred years’ time. ‘No, thirty years’, said Ni.

‘Come back soon’, he said. I promised I would.

The other person I met was the bum-crack professor. Liu Ping teaches Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) at Fudan University, a state institution, in the Department of Religious Studies. Liu lives with his wife and mother-in-law in a small, new minimalist apartment on the other side of Shanghai—in a city of 19 million that meant a one hour taxi ride belting along the new freeways. I did need to give the taxi driver a scrap of paper with the address in Chinese, a trick I soon learnt on arrival. Why not the university? Liu had a bad back, he said, so much so that he couldn’t get out much. Brusque, tall and very evangelical (he wore a ‘Jesus’ T-shirt), Liu served me water freshened with herbs and Chinese peaches. We sat the by the fan on this sweltering afternoon and talked of peaches, Shanghai water, bad backs, acupuncture, hard beds, Chinese farmers, Bibles, translations (he thumped a pile of such works on the table), including one of my ‘complex’ and ‘surprising’ books, Marxist Criticism of the Bible, underground churches, seminaries (they are crap, he told me, compared to universities) and a teaching stint at Fudan as soon as possible for me.

Before I knew it a few hours had passed and we didn’t even have smokes and Chinese beer to help us on our way. Suddenly I was lined up against the wall with Liu for the photograph to commemorate this ‘historic occasion’—Liu’s beautiful wife clicked away, continually telling us to smile (in Chinese, so Liu each time repeated the instruction). As for the bum crack, that turned on the stairs down to the roadway. Liu decided to walk me to the taxi and give instructions to the driver. But as we clumped down the stairs one after the other—he in his outside sandals, me in my joggers—he suddenly pulled down the back of his pants.

‘See’ he said, ‘my back. Can you see the marks from the acupuncture?’

All I noticed was his slightly wrinkled and hairless bum crack.

T99: Shanghai to Hong Kong

At last the time came for what I had really been waiting for: the train journey from Shanghai to Hong Kong (actually to Hung Hom station). Not the way people from overseas travel, I was told. ‘Why don’t you catch a plane?’ others opined. ‘It’s faster’. Not for me, an aviophobic who takes the strongest sleeping pills he can in order to bring on a coma for those dreadful long haul flights that are needed from time to time. No, I was after the train.

With a small slip of reddish paper that passed for a ticket in my hand, delivered by a sweating courier at the hotel moments before I had to go, I soaked in the hugely bustling Shanghai Central Station. Not before I had entrusted myself to a taxi driver who ran the gauntlet of Shanghai traffic with alarming adroitness and disregard for anyone or anything but our destination. Baggage checks, locals with bags of food for the journey, and then we were led through to a spanking new train.

Carriage 10, room 1: the guard had three words of English, but they were enough. I laughed in pure delight when I entered the compartment—the size of a four-bed compartment but with two beds. The rest of the space had

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The China Run

Roland Boer

an easy chair, bathroom and large table. Was I to share it with someone, an attractive woman perhaps, a farting old man, a fat American? No, I was told, it was my own space for the next 24 hours!

I felt slightly guilty. This was a deluxe soft sleeper, usually reserved for government officials. Most of the train was soft or hard sleeper, four or eight beds to a compartment. The guilt lasted a few seconds, especially when the air-conditioning remained stuck on icy. A large thermos of boiling water came in, a tea cup, and we were away. I was mesmerised by the passage, sitting in the easy chair by the movie screen of a window, watching the land pass by.

The new middle-rise apartment blocks on the outskirts of Shanghai gave way to construction lots with vast tents for the workers, muddy bicycles propped up against their sides. The ever-present trucks rumbled by on roads and dirt tracks. But I had seen all these in Shanghai and was after a different sense of China—at least as much as you can from a train window. The vertical, roughly cut mountains are such a contrast with the smooth, filed-down versions in Australia. These jagged Chinese mountains seemed as though a giant child had been playing with clay, squeezing it through her fingers, letting odd-shaped pieces drop as she haphazardly moulded the other pieces into whatever shape she wanted. New mountains with vertical sides, all manner of strange outcrops, jagged edges and wafts of mist.

In between the farmers—evidently an inventive lot—laid out plots in the most unlikely corners: rice paddies, soy fields, and vegetables grew in the tiniest pockets or in terraces up the sides of the mountains, or occasionally in the flats where a river had carved out some space. And I was taken not merely by the pointy hats (isn't everyone on their first visit to China?) but by the water buffalo. In Australia, up north in the tropics, water buffalo are mostly wild, shot for food at snooty restaurants and often regarded as destructive pests. Here a water buffalo would amble quietly on a rope behind a boy on the firm track between fields sunk in water. There one was at work in a field, up to its knees in water. And over there one quietly chewed while tethered to a post.

All along the route—almost 2000 km—came the villages. In the Australian countryside you can go for hours through bush, desert, or farmland without seeing another soul. Not in China, a country almost as vast but with more than 50 times the population of Australia. Every few kilometres another village turned up. Some were merely clusters of older dwellings, inventively proofed against rain and heat, but others were really double-villages. The old buildings were still there, with an odd squatter or two, but nearby was a cluster of new buildings, small two or three-story apartments, often with a crane nearby finishing off the job. Yet inside, I was told, people kept to simple ways. No modern bathrooms, Western-style lounge-rooms, or badly finished whizz-bang kitchens with buzzing appliances. Instead, you cooked in traditional style and still hung

your arse over a plank in a common toilet and kept up the supply of fertilizer for the fields. An alternative life-styler's paradise.

But there was far more to draw my gaze than outside the windows; the inside of trains is usually even more intriguing. As is my wont, I walked the length of the train. I passed by four-bed sleepers and the eight-bed hard sleepers, where people were making themselves at home, preparing to sleep with complete strangers and share each other's space for the next day—a temporary village in motion. In China, I was told, people feel comfortable with human breath; be alone too long and the spirits of the dead will join you all too soon. But that also means people find ways to use even the smallest spaces. In the corridors were small fold-out seats where two or three could leave the tight quarters and gather, chat and watch passers-by—like me, a lone, tall and fair stranger.

Eventually I found the dining car, where the kitchen was in full swing. Before I left, someone had warned me that food on the train was to be avoided at all costs. I braced myself for the worst, imagining the limp, soggy offerings from the buffet on the Sydney Melbourne XPT: pre-packaged micro-waved food that made airlines look like five-star restaurants. Or perhaps a mythical dining car that was officially announced but simply couldn't be found—as on the train from Belgrade to Sofia. At least they had nicotine which you could scrape from the windows. On that journey the single loaf of increasingly stale bread and a bottle of water went a long way in twelve hours. But I needn't have worried on this train from Shanghai to Hong Kong. There was freshly cooked food aplenty for next to nothing.

Half a dozen cooks were firing the stoves, peeling and chopping vegetables, lopping pieces off dead animals and tossing them into pots. Full of animated talk, jokes and teasing, they first loaded up scores of meal packages, which were then hauled through the train on a trolley to be sold for next to nothing. Only then was it time for the sit-down meal-goers. This is where the finer issues of social interaction over food in China escaped me. In a place where people are perfectly comfortable insisting on attention, standing or calling out until it arrives, I had little to go on and no language to rely on. So I sat quietly and looked out the window until eventually an alert and very attractive older woman noticed me and made her way over. Silently she handed me a simple menu and I remembered my advice from Lisa.

In Hong Kong, you find the spirit of Guangdong dishes (as food there is called). The cooks try to maintain the original taste and colour, as well as making the food delicious. In other areas, cooks may try to give the food strong seasonings; this may be caused by geographical factors, such as in Si'Chun province, where the humidity is high and not good for bones, so people eat spicy food to

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Art, Science and the Idea of Europe

Tim Mehigan

Thoughts on science and art and the ‘sober revolution’ of the new Europe

Europe, of course, is a peninsula. The western and southern extension of this peninsula is itself a peninsula—the Iberian Peninsula—and is made up of two closely related and yet quite distinctive nations, the Spanish and the Portuguese. These nations typify the sort of difference encountered in modern day Europe. Although the Spanish and Portuguese languages appear closely related in the written form, they are less so to the ear, where spoken Spanish cleaves more to its close cousin Italian and Portuguese is apt to sound more like a strange variant of the Russian tongue. The impression of difference despite commonality is also encountered in other areas: the two nations cast aside the yoke of Moorish dominion at different moments of their history, embraced Christianity with unequal fervour and have different literary traditions emanating from a Golden Age in the latter part of the 16th and the 17th century. Cervantes, who published his masterpiece *Don Quixote* in the early 17th century, is still considered the greatest of all Spanish writers, whereas the great Portuguese poet Camões, who flourished around the mid 16th century, has a serious modern rival in the Nobel Prize winning novelist Saramago. In the same vein, these geographically adjacent but individually distinctive countries on the Iberian Peninsula occupy different time zones: Spaniards set their clocks according to the western European standard, whereas Portugal, one hour behind, is in the same time zone as the British Isles. It can easily be seen, then, that distinctiveness is a quality that emerges in palpable ways at the periphery—a fact that is now exercising the politicians of the European Union as the EU expands toward Russia in the northeast and Turkey in the southeast. Given preponderant distinctiveness, it is perhaps surprising that Europeans have mustered strength and a sufficient sense of shared purpose to achieve the degree of economic, political, legal and increasingly moral unanimity it has achieved today. I look upon shared resolve and purpose above all as a cultural achievement.

It was this fascinating Iberian Peninsula with its subtle contrasts that I traversed on two recent missions to broker new exchange arrangements for fourth year students of Spanish for my employer, the University of Otago. During these two visits to Spain I also followed an ancillary purpose—to travel to Portugal to visit the Camões Institute, the Portuguese institution responsible for the support of Portuguese language and culture throughout the world. The goal of this ancillary mission was to arrange a jointly funded lectureship in Portuguese at Otago.

It was during my second visit to Portugal that I entered the Lisbon metropolitan underground immediately after a successful audience with the President of the Camões Institute and had an experience that I now wish to relate. The experience actually consisted in nothing more than descending the escalator at the metro stop ‘Parque’—one of the new additions to the metro network funded by European money after Portugal joined the European Union in 1986. As the escalator took me below to the trains, I noticed two quotations on opposite sides of the stairwell: one, a quotation from Heraclitus, the other, a pithy saying of Deleuze—neither, of course, Portuguese nationals nor even denizens of the Iberian Peninsula. It immediately interested me to know why Portugal, a small country of ten

million people on the periphery of Europe, would wish to signal such regard for two non-Portuguese Europeans: one, an ancient Greek philosopher, whose philosophy of change and becoming parallels the interest of modern science in the flux and instability of physical phenomena and who is accordingly considered by many to be the founder of science; the other, a French philosopher-critic and exponent of poststructuralist thinking, noted not only for his conceptual work on perception and visuality in relation to cinema and painting, but also for his defence of the creative, vitalistic imagination in the tradition of the French philosopher of the early 20th century Henri Bergson.

What follows is an attempt to engage with this neo-European and Portuguese juxtaposition of two thinkers: the originator of science, Heraclitus, on the one hand, and the vitalistic thinker about the possibilities of art, and Gilles Deleuze, on the other, the two separated by more than 2000 years, an expanse of time in which modern Europe came into being. My aim is to consider them not as they are or appear to be ‘in themselves’, but as representatives of a dialogue that has evolved in the European context between science and art, or, as I will also call it, reason and mysticism, a dialogue which in my view has brought about a good deal of the common cultural purpose that sustains modern Europe today.



Heraclitus of Ephesus, now in modern Turkey, is perhaps the most important of the early Greek philosophers who lived before Socrates. He famously understood flux and change to be the first principle of the universe: time builds and destroys all things. Heraclitus is also known for introducing the term ‘logos’ or reason—the source and fundamental order of

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Art, Science and the
Idea of Europe

Tim Mehigan

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the cosmos. As Bertrand Russell observed of Heraclitus' thought, while it is not easy to discover how Heraclitus arrived at his philosophy, many of his sayings 'strongly suggest scientific observation as the source'. His writings indeed abound with insights fashioned from observation of the natural world—the type of science that began to develop in the ancient world. 'This world, which is the same for all,' says Heraclitus, 'no one of gods or men has made; but it was ever, is now, and ever shall be, an everliving Fire, with measures kindling, and measures going out'. The science of today, of course, has evolved far beyond the science of Heraclitus; many would not even recognise a scientific temper in the statement just quoted. Yet, as Russell observes, Heraclitus' pronouncements can be admired as the 'true union of the mystic and the man of science—the highest eminence ... that it is possible to achieve in the world of thought'. They reveal how the Greek mind was simultaneously attracted to comprehending the uniformity of the world and the flux of life that contrasted with it. In Platonic philosophy these contrasting poles of human experience condition the aspirations of human beings: the unchanging forms are the imperfectly observable patterns that tell of the existence of the eternal divine; the unstable forces of flux and change, on the other hand, are intervening elements in life on earth that human beings are obliged to contend with, shape to their own ends and ultimately endure. The aspect of endurance comes across in Plato's cave allegory from book seven of *The Republic*, an allegory telling of the true circumstances of earthly life: the prisoners in the cave are constrained by a brace at the neck to apprehend only the flickering outline of figures that are cast as shadows on the inside of the cave wall. The eternal fire that lies behind the prisoners is never directly seen.

In Platonic thinking just as much as with Heraclitus, reason and mysticism mix indistinguishably. Indeed, for much of history since this time it was possible to be both a scientist and a mystic. Even the greatest of English scientists, Isaac Newton, was reportedly a part-time alchemist. (This, of course, is no

longer the case: a modern scientist is the antithesis of the mystic, even, for some like Richard Dawkins, the antithesis of the believer.) The long business of reversing this process, of bringing the mysticism out from under the grasp of science and thereby emptying science of all religion, was an achievement of European modernity. This achievement has brought forth cultural responses that vary according to where one happens to be in present day Europe: in Spain, as I was told by my Spanish teacher in Granada a few years ago, publicly you conduct yourself as a (Christian, Catholic) believer, privately you are a pagan.

The dialogue that to me appears to be central to modern European sensibility—that between science and art, reason and mysticism—was thus already apparent in Heraclitan science, though yet to become dialectical. Throughout the Middle Ages Greek science, with mystical dimensions that in the Platonic version of the world appeared entirely compatible with the Christian religion, remained pre-eminent. It was not until antiquity was rediscovered in Italy in the 15th century that a serious change in the relation between science and art began to appear. Such a change could not come about as long as art, by which I now mean the visual arts, lacked a capacity to offer a reliable representation of the real and thereby appear as something more than a religious iconography. The discovery of single point perspective in the early Renaissance—a discovery linked to a technique developed by Brunelleschi, Alberti, and, later, Piero della Francesca—must be accorded, for this reason, special significance.

Given preponderant distinctiveness, it is perhaps surprising that Europeans have mustered strength and a sufficient sense of shared purpose to achieve the degree of economic, political, legal and increasingly moral unanimity it has achieved today.

It was Brunelleschi, Alberti, and Piero who discussed and refined a way of representing space on a planar surface such that the figures that were captured on it had a realistic appearance, appearing pretty much as they do to the human eye. Using this new technique, which consisted of drawing out lines from a single viewing point and slicing through the virtual pyramid to create a cross-section, the artists of the early Renaissance advanced beyond the overlapping techniques in medieval art by which perspective had been signalled and thus depicted the world for the first time in fully accurate ways. The miracle of single point perspective enabled not merely a copy-like representation of the physical world; it also opened up a new range of themes. It allowed the world that was already antique to the 15th century, the world of ancient Greece and Rome, to come alive again and be represented, thus also initiating a dialogue between the ancients and the moderns that led understanding of antiquity out of the monastery. It also suggested a measure of human life that was something other than the 'veil of tears' (Russell) it was thought to amount to in the medieval understanding. In other words, the capacity

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to draw the human being in convincingly realistic ways—ways very like the way objects appear under the conditions of human cognition—was a significant factor in the slow process of overcoming the cloistered European Middle Ages.

A decisive shift in the relative positions of art and science thus began during the Renaissance. It occurred because of a sudden advance in the capacity of human beings, through art, or, more particularly, through a technical contrivance of artists, which is to say through artifice, to represent their world. This advance had the secondary effect of liberating the image from the word and moving the image into the public spaces of early modern Europe. It sparked interest in new questions, such as those that exercised the French Academy in the 1690s under the topic heading of the ‘querelle des Anciens et des Modernes’ (the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns)—in essence a debate about whether classical antiquity was still to be accepted as the ultimate authority in art and literature, or whether, as one of the contributors to this debate, Fontenelle, thought, the moderns were bound to surpass the knowledge that was possible in antiquity.

The important point, as Martin Jay and Jonathan Crary have indicated, is that the visual sense became a privileged ground of early modernity, for science no less than for art. For just as art discovered its independence from science (ironically by incorporating the use of geometry in its construction of space), science was to undergo its own great leap forward in the 16th and 17th centuries through a parallel endeavour to present an intuitive knowledge of the real (intuition is linked in its etymology to the mode of vision).

Although Galileo used the telescope to study the phases of Venus and the satellites of Jupiter, he was still guided by the classical understanding of human beings as, in Protagoras’s formulation, ‘the measure of all things’.

I am speaking about the Scientific Revolution, of course, a revolution both qua science, in its devising of a new experimental methodology, but also in cultural terms as a collective human endeavour that would liberate the world from superstition and render the real in reliably ‘empirical’ ways. The word and the concept ‘empiricism’, by the way, has been linked to science ever since. The peaceful cohabitation of science with empiricism was not interrupted until the early 20th century, when science encountered the limits of its own observational practices.

The Englishman Francis Bacon was the first commanding thinker in the vein of the new science who understood its practices and, just as importantly, its ambition to revolutionise social life. Bacon was not a scientist at all so much as a bureaucrat. He was certainly no academician. He loathed the halls of academe—especially those pillars of the medieval world, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge and their reverence for traditional thinking. Late in life a charge of accepting bribes cost Bacon his privileged post as Lord Chancellor of England. Before this indiscretion occurred, Bacon was to set out a comprehensive program of scientific knowledge, a grand lifework projected in six volumes which he called the Great Instauration—a rejection of the syllogistic method and Aristotelian science of the medieval schools in favour of a new formal methodology based on experimentation, inductive method and the patient collection of scientific results. Bacon looked upon science as a

social activity whose mission was not better acquaintance with God’s plan—the goal of the medieval mind—but rather the concrete, material improvement of human lives through the pursuit of scientific truth.

Scientific truth, as Descartes was later to describe it, thinking within a context of reasoning familiar to 17th century sceptics, could be defined as the state of being free from doubt. Baconian and Cartesian science—the platform on which modern science has been erected—has accordingly been linked by cultural critics such as Fredric Jameson to a psychological interest in attaining certainty. Stephen Toulmin has recently indicated the historical dimensions of this pursuit of certainty, viewing science in this period as a response to protracted upheaval during the Thirty Years’ War. Descartes, it is to be noted, served for a time in the Bavarian Army during this War. Either way—whether one takes one’s cue from Jameson or Toulmin—the origins of the new science are closely tied with the resurgence of scepticism in European thinking in the 17th century and have remained connected with it ever since. For confirmation of this link, one only need consider Karl Popper’s influential 20th century account of the way science moves forward following a principle of falsification of provisionally established scientific truth-statements.

From 1600 on, therefore, science not only discovered a new method and a new procedure, that of the experiment, patiently undertaken, repeated and patiently evaluated by a process Fred Wilson has called ‘eliminative induction’; it also discovered a compelling new argument that could be used to justify its pursuit, namely, the cumulative improvement of the circumstances of material life. Science, understood in this way, became a powerful new force promoting the secularisation of European life. Science accordingly had to initiate a break from the science of the ancient world, a science, as we have seen, where reason and mysticism had remained intertwined.

A complex new relation between science and art therefore emerges in the early modern period—the period from the Renaissance to the French Revolution. As reason and mysticism began to separate under the influence of gradual secularisation, they nevertheless remained interdependent

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at the level of the appearances. And the appearances, aided by certain technical enhancements, remained all-important: although Galileo used the telescope to study the phases of Venus and the satellites of Jupiter, he was still guided by the classical understanding of human beings as, in Protagoras's formulation, 'the measure of all things'. In early modern science this understanding applied to the realm of the visible appearances and could be taken as encouragement to stay within them. In fact, science and art were able to remain in dialogue as long as both sought to represent a world of everyday appearances, that is, the world as it presents itself to the everyday, predominantly unaided vision of a 5 foot something featherless biped. Our modern science, by contrast, shows no such regard for the appearances and is increasingly, and now in fact mainly, a science of what cannot be directly observed. As I see it, it was this progression of science beyond the limit of the visible appearances that was ultimately to sever the links between science and art and create the phenomenon of the 'two cultures', that is, the separateness of art and science both as practice and as forms of understanding.

To the featherless biped of the 17th and 18th century, however, science and art still happily coexisted. Moreover, the dependence of the new science on shared endeavour acted as a stimulus to the emergence of a public arena of life that was also of importance to art—a predominantly bourgeois sphere lying outside the royal courts from which the state, as something quite distinct from the court and person of the absolutist ruler, soon began to emerge. It is thus from this period that we also date the emergence of modern political institutions and the ideas with which they were associated.

One of the new political ideas that was to achieve considerable momentum was the idea of the contract—an idea which the systems theorist Luhmann has called one of the greatest inventions of the human being. It consisted in an argument where human beings, now already an immense reservoir of potential power Thomas Hobbes likened to 'leviathan', a monster of the deep, could accept sovereign rule

over their person in exchange for a guarantee of certain rights. The more essential these rights were deemed to be during this period, the more they were considered natural rights—the right of human beings to exist in a peaceable condition with one another as nature might have intended. In the Hobbesian argument the rights of ordinary human beings were seen to amount to little more than the right to physical protection, the basic right to life. Conjuring, as Leo Strauss observed, a fear of violent death—a fear which the civilian massacres of the English Civil War must have made to seem particularly pointed—Hobbes argued that human beings were compelled to accept and even revere the absolutist rule of the sovereign, since this type of rule offered the only possible way that the physical protection of subjects could be guaranteed. Later theorists in the contractual tradition, more sanguine than Hobbes about the nature of human beings and what human life could amount to, increasingly linked this compact of trust to an expanded list of civilian freedoms and to the human prospect for happiness—a concept that made its reappearance in the European tradition 2000 years after being first breathed into life in the philosophy of Aristotle.

Gilles Deleuze is among many intellectuals who turn to the possibilities of art in order to construe a basis on which the spirit of European community might be revived in the postwar world.

The contractualist position in early modern Europe, in which discussions about the happiness of citizens were to gain renewed expression, is notable for its pretensions to rationality. The arguments enjoining subjects to embrace a contract of rule, later a contract of sovereign government, were taken to constitute a rationally 'enlightened' position. Reinhart Koselleck has made this point in relation to Hobbes's *Leviathan*. For Hobbes, it was rational to accept sovereign rule in exchange for certain basic freedoms that could not be obtained in any other way. Reason, to this extent, appears to be a species of that same rational experimentation that delivers knowledge of the physical world and leads to an improvement in material life. In fact, as Toulmin has shown, reason understood in this way quickly gets put together with 'reasonableness' and comes to be associated with practical outcomes. The practical aspect of reason—what Kant was to call 'pure practical reason'—begins to dominate the discussion of reason during the latter part of this period. Reason, moving front and centre, thus begins to regrow the moral dimensions which Plato and Aristotle had found in reason from the beginning. To be rational in the 17th and 18th century is not only to think in the ways of the new science, it is also to exercise religious toleration and to forge a community committed to the realisation of the moral dimensions of humanity. Rousseau, who was drawn to the vision of such a moral community in his *Social Contract* of 1762, felt that reason



The bond between reason and mysticism was present in the science of Heraclitus, where a scientist, not an artist, would celebrate the flux that arose from the ‘everliving fire’ that fuelled life on earth.

and mysticism could even be harmonised again in a second and higher state of nature.

Of course, as we now know, this discussion of moral rationality has little to do with the rational methodology of science, which works, as Bacon himself understood so well, only if the prejudices of human beings—their tendency to bind up their own anticipations with what they desire to know—were first removed completely from the mind of the scientific experimenter. That science has nothing at all to do with morality is an insight of the early 20th century. This point was put with particular insistence by the Frankfurt School philosophers Adorno and Horkheimer in their singularly important, yet breathtakingly turgid, work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). Adorno and Horkheimer were in no doubt that the ‘science of reason’ emerged from Bacon’s hostility toward the ‘idols’ of human reflection and the desire to force nature, that is, denaturalise it, if physical nature was to be exploited in socially beneficial ways. The argument of the *Dialectic* might therefore be summarised as the insight that science’s programmatic desire to empty itself of all superstition and thereby ‘disenchant’ the world, was a grand and yet, horribly misguided, success. For in taking out mystical superstition from science, science also separated itself, fatefully, from all morality. It was this argument that led Adorno and Horkheimer to view the concentration camp and the Holocaust as a deeply perverse, deeply immoral by-product of human calculation and reason.



The ancient dialogue between science and art, reason and mysticism, which seemed to offer so much to so many Europeans and, beyond Europe, to those newer countries to which European values had been successfully exported, thus developed dramatic new dimensions by the early 20th century. These dimensions arise from the success of an idea—the idea of science, not its failure.

For most of the period from 1600 to 1900, science asserted its claim to ever increasing influence over the minds and social practices of human beings. For most of this same period, the fact that science of Baconian provenance, in essence a description of principles by which to perform science, was not the same as Enlightenment reason, in essence a series of philosophical arguments arising from the virtues of reasonableness, was completely overlooked. To an 18th century mind, reasonableness and rational science seemed indistinguishably of a piece. To an attentive citizen of the 20th century, it had become increasingly clear that the reason of science had little in common with the project to bring about, in Kant’s 18th century words, not merely ‘an age of Enlightenment, but also an enlightened age’. The consequences of such confusion became obvious to a number of important thinkers from Max Weber and Edmund Husserl at the turn of the 20th century to Adorno, Horkheimer and Jean Paul Sartre in the mid part of the century. The thought of these theorists and philosophers, in turn, has

influenced much of the critical discussion about reason, society, morality, culture and art that we associate with critical theory, structuralism and poststructuralism since the 1960s and 1970s.

We must now acknowledge that when Enlightenment thinkers talked of reason, they ultimately meant something quite different from the methodology of science, even if such science involves ‘second-order’ reasoning processes in interpreting its observations. In some accounts of the Enlightenment, indeed, the factor of science is completely left out. Instead, the Enlightenment is presumed solely to be about the kinds of arguments advanced in the philosophical disquisitions of the *philosophes*: questions about social improvement, political association and the reach of religion in modern secular society. The reason of science and rational reflection about virtuous ends were also put together by Horkheimer and Adorno in their references to the Enlightenment in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—a complicating element in their argument that possibly delayed the reception of this work for several decades in Anglophone countries. This melding, however, is legitimate to some extent, because it reflects the habits of the 18th century mind, where to be rational was to support the conduct of science and sometimes to practise it as well as to be reasonable and morally virtuous.

Yet morality and moral virtue are not any species of experimental science. They might not even be a species of reason. For some commentators, Kant wrote the third *Critique of Reason* (1790) because the categorical imperative of the second *Critique*, in which Kant advances his notion of morality, could not be satisfactorily derived from the operation of reason. In this third *Critique*, Kant adduced a basis for the rational existence of community not from the reason of science but from aesthetic reflection about art—the dispassionate connectedness with others that stakes its claim over us when we contemplate beauty. In Kant’s argument, it is the beauty of art that moves us to find a universal principle of ‘disinterestedness’ on which we might fashion community. And it is the sublime, a concept equally associated with art, which enjoins us not to stray too far from community into the terror of formlessness (where we become frightened individuals again). Human community in Kant’s understanding is

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Art, Science and the
Idea of Europe

Tim Mehigan

thus an achievement of the terrain of the middle—an area of life lived partly as an individual and therefore privately, partly as a member of a group and therefore publicly. This conception of civilized life is indebted to the sensuous notions of humanity made available by art and artists, not scientists.

It is this recourse to beauty and the sublime, to the conceits of artists, that surfaces in the European thinking that began to emerge after the Second World War, when old European society everywhere lay in ruins. Gilles Deleuze is among many intellectuals who turn to the possibilities of art in order to construe a basis on which the spirit of European community might be revived in the postwar world.

I do not wish to characterise the rich thought of Gilles Deleuze—his studies of Kant, Hume, Spinoza, Leibniz and Bergson, his work with Felix Guattari on capitalism and its relation to schizophrenia, his notions of the ‘body without organs’ and his so-called desiring machines, his innovative studies of perception as it relates to cinema and, finally, the idea of creative transformation that runs throughout his work. Rather I would conclude these remarks, now broadly in the province of art, with consideration of a concept promoted by Deleuze and his collaborator Guattari in a short work first published in French in 1975 and translated under the heading *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* in 1986.

Deleuze and Guattari introduce their concept of minor literature by discussing the situation of Franz Kafka, a German-speaking Jew in a Czech country and culture.

The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation. We might as well say that minor literature no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature.

Even he who has the misfortune of being born in the country of a great literature must write in its language, just as a Czech Jew

writes in German, or an Ouzbekian writes in Russian.

Writing like a dog digging a hole, a rat digging its burrow.

And to do that, finding his own point of underdevelopment, his own patois, his own third world, his own desert.

There are two ways, Deleuze and Guattari then say, of dealing with this minority condition in literature. The one way is to ‘reterritorialize’ literature, that is, to claim for it a new existence within the context of an existing mythology, an old alchemy, an old set of symbols and archetypes. In other words: the staking out of new territory for a major literature. This they claim was the approach taken by the Prague school of Gustav Meyrink and Kafka’s literary editor Max Brod. Yet Kafka does not take this route:

Rather he will invent another way. He will opt for the German language of Prague as it is and in its very poverty. Go always farther in the direction of deterritorialization, to the point of sobriety. Since the language is arid, make it vibrate with new intensity. Oppose a purely intensive usage of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply signifying usages of it. Arrive at a perfect and unformed expression, a materially intense expression.

Kafka uses language in the same way as the Irishmen Joyce and Beckett do: Joyce for English, Beckett for English and French. ‘That’, say Deleuze and Guattari, ‘is the glory of this sort of minor literature—to be the revolutionary force for all literature’.

‘The revolutionary force for all literature’, as Deleuze/Guattari see it, is a project of cultural transformation in the realm of art. The vitalistic associations of art now part company with modern science, absolutely. Yet our survey of the relation between science and art has revealed that science and art had been closely connected in the ancient world. The bond between reason and mysticism was present in the science of Heraclitus, where a scientist, not an artist, would celebrate the flux that arose from the ‘everliving fire’ that fuelled life on earth. In the period after the Second World War—a period marked by a strong appreciation of the limits of reason and a new understanding of the limits of science—the dialogue between science and art has been renewed, no longer as a co-habitation, but with the new conviction of separateness. It is art in its separation from science from which all cultural transformations now emerge.

Chief among these, of course, is the project to grow a new Europe—surely one of the most interesting ideas currently circulating on our planet. In leading back to the periphery of the European peninsula, and more particularly to the metro station ‘Parque’ in Lisbon where these reflections really started, I would end with another quote from *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*—a quote that indicates something of the vision of minority that invests the consciousness of the new Europe, whatever else it might be taken to be:

How many people today live in a language that is not their own? Or no longer, or not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are forced to serve? This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of minor literature, but also a problem for us all: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path?

Europe today, therefore is a project not of ‘reterritorialization’ but of ‘deterritorialization’; a path not of grandiloquent conquest, but of assertive minority. In this sense, then, ‘a sober revolution.’ **a**

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film The Road to Where?

review by Valerie Krips

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The Road to Where?

Valerie Krips

Valerie Krips is an editor of *Arena Magazine* and an Honorary Fellow in the School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne.

The Road, John Hillcoat (dir.), 2009

Watching the filmed version of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* in the wake of the apparent failures of Copenhagen is a salutary experience. This is not just because the characters wake and walk in a dead landscape but because what is left of humanity has fallen into a tenuous form of co-operation among individuals who are clearly looking out for themselves above all else. And they are mostly cannibals because no food of any kind is to be found, other than what remains in so far overlooked places, like fall-out shelters and hidden basements. Some of the basements are particularly productive, yielding more than tinned goods: in them lie human larders, people who are being eaten limb by limb. They are the only things left in the pantries of the co-operatives, and it is clear that when they have all gone, the group will turn upon itself. Yes, terrible.

Among all this horror a father (Viggo Mortenson) and his son (Kodi Smit-McPhee) walk, pushing a supermarket trolley containing their few belongings. They are starving, too, and spend their days watching out for marauding bands as they search for food. The landscape is grey and desolate in ways that exceed the possibility of relief: all is broken, dead, destroyed. It rains almost continually, a dirty grey rain. They sleep where they can: sometimes in decrepit houses or ruined cars, but frequently under a tarpaulin. They are cold, too; the sun never breaks through the gloom above.

It is not clear how long they have been walking, but they have been together, just the two of them, for almost all of the boy's life, ten years more or less. The father reads to his son from a children's book they have managed to keep with them but the world described in the book is so unlike the one the boy knows that for him it is a fantasy, a dream world, like the one his father sometimes remembers, and tries to forget as soon as he wakes.

If all this reminds the viewer of Becket, of Estragon's dreaming which Vladimir does not want to hear, and if the greyness seems like the world outside the room in which Hamm and Clov exist, that would not be surprising. The man and boy go on, because they must, just as Becket's characters do. Why? McCarthy's answer seems to be because of hope and because of love, painful as both are in the circumstances in which the father and his son find themselves.

McCarthy's novel received great and deserved praise. It is bleak, as are most of his novels, spare, and written in prose of extraordinary beauty and precision. The writing in itself cannot, however, serve, lovely as it is: a novel is more than its language. What the novel enables its reader to think, and to imagine, how it both limits and extends the meanings the reader can make of the text, and the ways in which these meanings can transit into the reader's known world are among the tasks of fiction. In McCarthy's work these are fulfilled to such an extent that making a film version of any of his books seems either dangerous or completely pointless. Yet here it is: and now it is here, it seems obvious that we should have it, and that it should be as good as undoubtedly it is.

Bringing a film to the screen is, to repeat the point, really rather dangerous. Readers have a tendency to know what the characters of books look and sound like; they also have a habit of making up their minds about meaning, a habit endorsed, of course, by much literary theory. Working out what a book means depends, as Frank Kermode told us, upon the sense we have of the ending. As obviously true as this is for detective fiction, which, as many critics have argued, arose out of the increasing opacity of the lifeworld in the late 19th century, and in particular of the increasing occlusion of human labour, it is equally true for writing like McCarthy's. Whether Joe Penhall, who wrote the screenplay, and Australian John Hillcoat, who directed the film, have produced an ending that readers of the novel will recognize is likely to be the cause of discussion, because it is to the meaning of the ending to which the whole of the filmed narrative tends. Several reviewers of the film have already remarked on what they have seen as tendency to overplay the redemptive aspects of the novel yet, even as they do this, they find themselves unable to deny that McCarthy's ending can, depending upon how you read it, offer hope.

Distinct from the novel, the film elucidates McCarthy's work with a considerable interpretative and creative skill. What is most remarkable in both film and book are the reminders of a lost world, reminders which operate like memory, linking the past and the world lost to the present, the world that remains, filling out the present which in turn remakes the past. The horror is held up against what was beautiful, and the evidence of that beauty is found in the relationship of father to son. There is a humanity that defies cannibalism and the dead landscape, furnishing the film's scenes with tenderness and beauty. And with the frailty of humanity, surviving here without recourse to anything beyond itself, except to the light that, as the father tells the son, they carry and must carry. They don't want to go on, but they must go on, because of it.

In what does this beauty inhere? In one of the most memorable of the scenes in



the film, the father and son come across a house in which the father is able to bathe his son, to wash his hair, and to soap his body. It is a scene of the terrible beauty of love, of that mix of pain and joy together, of what is also called ecstasy. It is also a scene in which ordinary things are done, when some human work is undertaken: fetching water, heating it, using it. These things are possible within a habitation that, because it is in ruins, reminds the father, and the film's viewer, of the world of work and action, of the things that make up a life. These things take time to build, and time to enjoy, and time is what the couple do not have. Hard on their heels are marauding gangs, and the father must hurry to get his son to the sea. Their moment of respite doesn't last, since they must go out into the greyness and dark again, but the viewer is entitled to think that the memory and possibility of such human and humanizing activity remains, a glimmer of the light they carry.

Later they come across an old man, played by Robert Duvall. He is the film's philosopher, gnostic and staunch but physically frail. The boy takes to him, delighted by another human, one from whom they need not run. But the father, who is sickening to death, is now reduced to caring only for his son and getting him to the sea, where it is hoped there may be something better, though what that can be is difficult to imagine. In fact, when they arrive at the edge of a grey sea and on a beach covered in detritus, they are soon deprived of all that they have. The son is left on shore as the father swims out to a wreck, to see what he can scavenge. In the meantime, a man has stolen all their goods. They catch him, but leave him stranded, stripped, against the boy's pleas on his behalf, naked and shoeless. Doomed.

At the film's ending, when the father has died, his son joins a family group, people who have been following, concerned for them. This is the way the book ends, too: whether or not this family can make it through to some future is, uncertain, like life itself. But a group they are, and one based on what is, presumably, a better kind of co-operation than that of the marauding murderers.

In what does the hope of this ending consist? The film poses the same question as the novel. The novel's readers are perhaps entitled to look back to McCarthy's earlier work to try to piece together an idea about the world implied by the texts, and to think of *The Road* as an extension of that. In both *The Border Trilogy* and *No Country for Old Men* another kind of light, of personal honour and a belief in the possibility of goodness, what might be called a cultural good, underlies otherwise similarly bleak social worlds. Those are worlds in which the social groups of the American West—loosely linked cowboys and old-style law men—battle on against an otherwise increasingly amoral world, bringing to it the memory of work, solidarity and of law: three of the great underpinnings of all cultures.

That individuals, operating almost entirely alone, carry these memories is not much of a consolation, perhaps. And for the viewer who has not read McCarthy's novels the possibility of thinking the film as part of a longer sequence of thought about the social and the individual is not available. So the film's version of hope must stand alone. And it seems to depend entirely upon some internal spirit that, in spite of everything, carries an idea of light, which presumably means goodness at least. Here the calamitous events, whatever they were, come into their own as explanation. In them it is clear that the breakdown of the web of the social and the slow pulling in to the singular family unit is chief among the calamities to affect the world. Because they are attempting to exist alone, and because they can look to no good from anyone else, the child's mother walks into the dark and cold night, knowing she will die. Her mute acknowledgement that their existence depended upon a friendly nature and the networks of human interaction combined resonates in the film. That it may have been these networks that caused the calamity in the first place is one of the film's many ironies, but that humans cannot exist without the networks of the social and of culture is not one of them. Perhaps from the small family, extended by the addition of the orphaned boy, who set out on another long walk at the end of the film, a new social and cultural network will appear. That is, perhaps, the hope and the light that the father passed to his son. 

book **History in the Wireless**

review by Melzer

Bridget Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations: The Story of Australian Commercial Radio* (UNSW Press, Sydney, 2009)

The 20th century was an era of machines—gazillions of them—from serious, life-changing industrial giants to the weird and wacky things people made because they could, like that apple peeling rotisserie thing! Arguably, radio—the wireless—is the machine that has been embraced by more people in the Western world than any other. Radio offers an immediate, portable and inexpensive experience, but its biggest attraction is that the radio receiver has people inside it—people with live voices, people keen to interact with you personally

and regularly and involve you in a shared experience.

Bridget Griffen-Foley, the Director of the Centre for Media History at Macquarie University, has taken the history of one strand of the Australian radio industry, commercial radio (as distinct from government-funded or community radio), as a topic for her new book, *Changing Stations: The Story of Australian Commercial Radio*. Australia arguably has the best developed tripartite radio industry of any country in the world. All three sectors are large, viable and well supported.

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The Road to Where?

Valerie Krips

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History in the
Wireless

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02-03 2010

No 104

Commercial radio in Australia has had an extremely colourful and eventful history. It began in the period between the wars and has been warmly embraced by most Australians since. Griffen-Foley tells the story of the way Australian commercial radio evolved as a hybrid of the British model of being purely state-owned (commercial radio only started in the United Kingdom in 1973) and the free market structure of the United States, where there is no government-owned broadcasting. The market-oriented banality of today's commercial radio in Australia gives no clue to the richness of its history. *Changing Stations* describes an industry searching for an audience, while exploring Australian culture and community.

The early days of radio were shown to be most successful when 'intimate, human and personal'. 'Uncles' and 'Aunts' were featured in many programs. 'Radio's potent capacity to deny its own status as a mass medium' by making personal connections is an ongoing feature of programming. 'Uncles' and 'Aunts' took their shows on the road, appearing at hospitals and charities. In 1938, 50,000 people queued up to see Uncle Tom's show at Sydney's Plaza Theatre.

The Depression saw the launching of radio clubs. Eunice Stelzer, a music teacher who performed on 2GB, founded the most significant one, 'The Happiness Club'. Stelzer formed sixty-four branches across Sydney and New South Wales. The club's motto was 'others first' and it oversaw activities such as a vocational training arm for boys. By 1948, The Happiness Club had 20,000 members. Although most of the clubs were upbeat during the Depression, Jack Davey started a Miserable Club reporting on funerals, and launched a Back to Jail Week and a radio serial *How to Murder in your Own Home*.

Griffen-Foley expresses surprise that there has been so little research into commercial radio—certainly compared to its less popular cousins, the ABC and community radio. Perhaps not surprising when you consider that commercial radio is now little more than a business—a popular one nonetheless.

The book is presented in two sections: programming and the industry. Both mirror a shape that narrows over time, becoming less innovative and more focussed on the bottom line. The

Today's market-oriented commercial radio gives no clue to the richness of its history.

programming section covers its evolution from the first attempts to provide Australian listeners with 'amusement—the only way to make broadcasting a success', as AWA's CEO Ernest Fisk, an early driving force, said at the first Australian radio conference in 1923. With what seems like a foundation statement expressing the industry ethos, an early studio manager is quoted as regarding 'his listeners as morons' and another states that 'the more moronic listeners are, the better' for advertising.

Programming was innovative as it searched for an audience. Experimental programming was a feature of the medium's pioneers. In 1931, 2UW produced live broadcasts of lyrebirds' calls; in 1948, 2CH featured singing weather reports; 3AW featured programs on child psychology. Radio dramas started in the late 1920s and 1930s. Playwrights used sound to compensate for the absence of sets and makeup, and early radio dramas saw the development of the first recorded sound effects. Popular radio serials ran for decades. In the pre-television days, radio celebrities such as George Edwards and Nell Stirling featured in radio magazines, the Brad and Angelina of the time. Talent quests were another common programming feature, attracting live theatre audiences of thousands for weekly broadcasts. *Amateur Hour* is credited with discovering Johnny O'Keefe, Harold Blair and Rolf Harris. Sport was a significant feature of early radio. The 'synthetic' Test coverage made way for live broadcasts. In 1937, Myra Dempsey forged a reputation as a broadcaster of sports and women's programs from 3BO in Bendigo. The local sports store sponsored her coverage of that Ashes series.

Listeners were hungry for content. Industries grew around radio production and transcription services of imported American programs. Once radio proved that it had an audience, the advertising industry jumped on board. In 1937 Wrigley's launched a local version of the popular American series *Amos'n'Andy*. It sought to make a program 'of the soil', which resulted in the serial *Dad and Dave*.

From the detailed accounts in *Changing Stations*, it seems commercial radio played a far greater role in community activities in earlier times than now. During the war, broadcasting was used for 'entertainment, service to the

community'. 6KY hosted *Red Cross Corner* and many stations raised funds for veterans' homes and other charities. Commercial radio played a pivotal role in fighting bushfires that ravaged Victoria and NSW in the 1930s.

Radio became an important source of news during World War II and regulation of broadcasting was brought into sharper focus. The government was worried that radio news was less credible than newspapers and business was concerned that radio was a distraction from work. In 1940, Keith Murdoch, Rupert's father and media mogul of the time, was appointed Director-General of Information by the federal government. Murdoch was concerned that the listening public was not capable of imposing 'any self-discipline' in regard to listening to the radio and considered limiting the amount of news broadcast.

Ownership of stations was diverse—the Melbourne Trades Hall Council owned 3KZ from 1931. This led to the Post-Master General's Department censoring a member of the Victorian Labour College for broadcasts 'advocating the value of strikes in uniting workers'.

Community involvement in commercial radio stations was more evident prior to the development of community radio in Australia. In the late 1970s, the Macquarie network formalised policies of community support as a valuable method of 'publicity, particularly given the rise of new ... community radio stations'. *Changing Stations* details how stations, especially in the bush, worked closely with their communities. In 1956, 6VA in Albany used on air appeals to save the local hospital from closing. In 1968, it launched an appeal to finish the building of a local youth centre. Working with the Murrumbidgee Agricultural Service around 1950, Al Grassby, a presenter for 2RG in Griffith, broadcast segments such as 'how to spray your earth mites' in Italian to local farmers.

Television spelled the end of the radio serial. Commercial radio programming retreated into a narrowness dominated by popular music from the late 1950s. Talkback radio was legalised in the late 1960s and, with pop music, helped assure radio's future. Talkback completed the loop and made radio truly interactive.

The other section of *Changing Stations* centres on the 'back story' of commercial radio: regulation, ownership and advertising. The book chronicles the struggle to regulate the industry, referring to the legislation that governed radio as being an 'inchoate patchwork', and quotes two chairmen of the regulatory authority, the Broadcasting Tribunal—one has doubts about its power to regulate and another labels the regulator as a 'toothless tiger'. Broadcasting laws were re-written, but the Broadcasting Services Act 1992 was a shift to an even more 'market-oriented approach to broadcasting' that failed to improve the regulatory regime.

The Cash for Comment scandal of the late 1990s highlighted the inadequacies of media regulation in Australia. The Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) found that 2UE breached the law or the Codes of Practice almost 100 times. The ABA imposed two new conditions on licenses: the need to distinguish between programming and advertisements and disclosure requirements for presenters. While *Changing Stations* states that these episodes 'revealed a systemic failure to ensure the effective operation of ... codes of practice', it is strangely quiet on Alan Jones and 2GB's role in the Cronulla riots. Readers are left to wonder why these episodes aren't more fully explored given their seriousness.

Successive governments have sought access to the more popular presenters on commercial radio. It is, of course, debatable as to whether there is a link between politicians' interest in appearing on popular commercial radio programs and a lack of political will to give the regulatory authority more control over those programs. The regulator, now called Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), found that Alan Jones breached Commercial

Radio Codes of Practice in 2005. ACMA ruled that his program encouraged violence and brutality and vilified Lebanese people on the basis of their ethnicity; however, these findings have had little impact on Jones' access to the airwaves. *Changing Stations* states that there are 'significant flaws in the regulatory framework and an urgent need to expand ... sanctions available' to the regulatory authority.

Changing Stations provides a detailed account of how commercial radio in Australia has survived the arrival of cinema, television, FM technology and maybe even the internet. There are a growing number of platforms that carry programs from sources other than Australian commercial radio studios. This is one challenge to the survival of the industry. Another is the high infrastructure costs of digital radio. Digital radio transmission using DAB+ will offer clear advantages in audio quality over any competitor using audio over the internet. It will be interesting to see what effect the pressure to develop a business case for digital radio has on the programming of commercial radio: innovation or a conservative approach? *Changing Stations* documents how the commercial radio sector has left the resource-hungry activity of news reporting mainly to the ABC.

In 2010, the development of digital radio sees the ABC making the running with alternative programming and an explosion of new channels. It's a great pity that the federal government has stymied community radio in its development of digital radio. Even with its track record of programming innovation and entry-level training for the industry, for the first time in its history community radio has been relegated to less than parity with the other sectors in the establishment of digital radio. While the introduction of digital radio to Australia means we have caught up with the rest of the Western world, it will be interesting to see if it can prevent radio stations becoming production houses rather than broadcasters.

Bridget Griffen-Foley has done an impressive job. With sixty-nine pages of footnotes, this is a meticulously researched and comprehensive history. For those of us who have either worked in the industry or have embraced radio, it is pleasing to see the subject treated with such attention to detail and yet remain accessible.

In 1922, inventor Thomas Edison predicted that 'The radio craze will die out in time'. Edison was clearly a clever fella; he was just not always right. And yet there are many around in 2010 who think that Edison's prediction will soon come true, that this is the time that radio will die, overwhelmed by the internet, crackling and fading off towards the horizon. **a**

book Giving them Curry!

review by Bhakthi Puvanenthiran

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History in the
Wireless

David Melzer

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Giving them Curry!

Bhakthi Puvanenthiran

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Arundhati Roy, *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* (Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2009)

I am a little worried for Arundhati Roy's life. If the thesis of her new title, *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* serves, if all the Indian public wants from democracy is a self-contained family saga of pride and revenge, then Roy's days are almost certainly numbered. For some years now, she has been making enemies with the Hindu ultra-nationalist Right and its innumerable foot soldiers, calling them out on state-sanctioned racism, shoddy procedure and abuses of power that have become the hallmarks of sub-continental politics. Roy's most recent offering, a compilation of such pot-stirring works, can only be making her day-to-day life more dangerous.

Take this paragraph for example, lifted from the opening essay, 'Democracy: Who is She When She's at Home?', about the anti-Muslim pogroms, which describes how government and police averted their eyes from communal rioting in revenge for the burning of a train containing fifty-nine Hindus.

While the parallels between India and pre-war Germany are chilling, they're not surprising ...One difference is that here in India, we don't have a Hitler. We have, instead, a travelling extravaganza, a mobile symphonic orchestra. The hydra-headed, many-armed Sangh Parivar—the joint family' of Hindu political and cultural organisations—with the BJP, the RSS, the VHP and the Bajrang Dal each playing a different instrument.

I read this first in Berlin, where I was seeing as many Holocaust museums as possible in the few days I had there. Standing outside the Reichstag, the tour guide reiterated how honest Hitler had always been, how obvious his intentions seem in hindsight. The echo with Roy's essay proved upsetting. A many-headed beast can only be harder to take down than a single man, as Roy herself well knows.

Occasionally adding to my discontent was Roy's tone. 'It makes you wonder—are the people always right?' she asks by way of setting up the theme of the book. On other occasions Roy lazily conflates issues: Prozac, the mass media, US imperialism. One comes to expect, even have affection for, superfluous rhetoric from a certain variety of Indian writers. Juvenile regressions like this, however, are too frequent not to be distracting.

Having established the theme, Roy presents a number of previously published articles and lectures in chorological order. The second essay in the set, 'How Deep Shall We Dig?', is a call to arms. It rummages under the flimsy sheen of India Inc. and pulls out some stable, if predictable, connections between the concurrent rise of neo-liberal capitalism and communal neo-fascism in India. On the topic of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which claims to create a polity based on 'ancient' Hindu culture, not unlike Britain's BNP, she is staunch. 'While one arm is busy selling off the nation's assets in chunks, the other, to divert attention, is arranging a baying, howling, deranged chorus of cultural nationalism.' Interestingly, the recurrent multi-armed orchestral imagery is mirrored in Roy's own role as a marshal in the anti-fascist, anti-capitalist struggle. The essay regularly drops into the collective 'we', and is full of directives for the

'many nonviolent resistance movements fighting isolated, single-issue battles across the country'. Don't fight amongst yourselves. Do reclaim the public spaces stolen by the Hindu Right. Don't be resigned to non-violence.

Less militant, but just as compelling, is 'And His Life Should Become Extinct: The Very Strange Story of the Attack on the Indian Parliament'. Roy patiently teases out each thread in this essay, exposing the horrendous judicial patch-up job following a terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament in 2001. The accused, Mohammed Afzal, remains on death row despite mountains of information, including Roy's own detective work, suggesting he is unlikely to have committed the crime—'a pawn in a very sinister game'.

The title work, 'Listening to Grasshoppers: Genocide, Denial and Celebration' goes back to the communal rioting in Gujarat in 2002, comparing it to the atrocities of the Armenian genocide. 'It's an old human habit, genocide is. It has played a sterling part in the march of civilisation', she recalls. To borrow from economics, it is Roy's clarity in macro-analysis that makes her so valuable. She knows the place of things, and in doing so, encourages you to think she might know what's yet to come too.

Capping off the collection is a fictional appendix called 'The Briefing'. It reads as a letter from a head bean counter of a fake snow corporation of the future (of course, all the real snow has melted as a result of global warming). Roy slips easily from non-fiction to fiction, and this work, brief as it is, provides an apt ending, tangential enough to be interesting but relevant enough to make sense.

Listening to Grasshoppers is almost everything you could hope for from a compilation of political essays: practical, detailed and self-aware. The essays build well and carry an authority that would be impossible to pull off without the long-term commitment to these issues that Roy can claim. Of course there are limitations: a tendency to be obvious, an inflexible Marxist grounding. But to focus on such details would be to miss the point. More than a book, *Listening to Grasshoppers* is a



Green Army for a War We Can't Win

Simon Cooper

Burnt earth and policy language: one year after Victoria's bushfires

A year after the bushfire that roared across the Strezlecki Ranges there are signs of renewal. Farm paddocks are green again after decent rain, and many of the gums have started to reshoot. Driving up to the Grand Ridge Road south of Traralgon one can almost forget what took place here; the shiny new sheds and houses lift the spirit, suggesting a new prosperity—until you reflect upon what happened to their predecessors. Still, as you wind up the road the impression is that nature and humanity are slowly reclaiming the landscape. That is until you are almost at the top of the hills, just out of Balook, where the view abruptly shifts. Even after a year the mind reels from this revelation of the full impact of the fire. Suddenly as far as the eye can range there is only destruction, no vegetation, just bare hills—a panoramic image of a dead planet. Burnt stick-figures are all that remain of the thousands of pines and blue gums that once grew in plantation formation—it looks like nature's version of Arlington cemetery, the dead all precisely lined up. It was like this a year ago and even more shocking than the total devastation is the fact that there seems to be no regrowth at all. Yet if you drive for just five more minutes the contrast could not be starker. The Tarra-Bulga National Park reveals a lush area of temperate rainforest untouched by the bushfire. Ten steps inside on the first walking trail, you are able to forget the destruction just beyond. The fire must have been at its peak as it came right to Tarra-Bulga, having gained force and momentum from the acres of plantation it ripped through, yet it did not penetrate the forest, instead going around it on all sides. The thick bush and undergrowth trapped moisture, enabling the bush to repel the fire. By contrast the thousands of acres of plantation not only were consumed, but have failed to regenerate, leaving a scarred and inhuman landscape.

Little has been said about the role of plantations in the year of pained reflection upon the Black Saturday fires. Already highly flammable, plantation timber can exacerbate the speed and force of a fire because any undergrowth has usually been poisoned, so that under extreme conditions there is no possibility of vegetative mass and moisture impeding the progress of the fire. At one preliminary bushfire inquiry I know of, questions about plantation timber (the proximity to houses, the fuel build-up, and the responsibility of the timber company in regeneration of the landscape) were actively discouraged, with one scribe declaring that such questions could not be written down because as a timber worker he had a conflict of interest. The aftermath of the fires saw an understandable cry for action, a need to apportion blame, and sections of the media chose to declare a culture war on environmentalists and councils that did not sufficiently burn or clear forests or treed areas. Despite the complexity of the situation, and the diversity of scientific opinion, the rallying cry was for more controlled burns, more clearing and more intervention. Contemplating the devastation around Balook and the untouched section of protected rainforest just

beyond, you can't help wonder whether the demand for burning and clearing are adequate to the situation. The acres of plantation with no understory represent the ideal of those who wish to master nature, while the same viewpoint regards the national park as a signifier of neglect, inaction, years of accumulated fuel waiting to go up. Yet one burned while the other didn't, which ought to at least give us pause when thinking about our dominion over nature.

Climate change presents an unprecedented challenge. It requires long-term thinking outside of the immediacies of the news and political cycle. It requires changes in lifestyle without any immediate payoff. For the first time since modernity, a genuine embrace of limits—to growth and consumption, of industrial progress is required, as is co-operation amongst states and nations. At one end of a range of possible responses lie hopes for more harmonious relations between people, the environment, and each other. At the other end lies a desperate scramble to secure power, wealth and resources within a shrinking sense of the life-world. With this comes the creation of a fortress mentality with all its attendant paranoia. Not so long ago almost everybody was 'for' the environment, agreeing that something needed to be done. Does the stalling of national and international measures at the end of 2009 indicate a shift in attitudes, where the enormity of the task ahead leads to a backlash against any attempt to 'think global'?

The failure of the Copenhagen talks combined with the leaked email scandal of 'climategate', and the admission of the possibility of error in one or two climate projections, has allowed the sceptics and deniers more media time than usual. At the national and international level, the hollowness of much political rhetoric around the environment has been revealed, and within this vacuum lurks a more problematic politics. Engaging with global warming, or indeed any large-scale environmental issue, requires us to engage with the abstract—scientific data, extended timelines, 'invisible' causes and effects. The lack of effective action at this level, where even a demonstrably feeble scheme like the ETS cannot be assured of getting up, has opened up the way for political calls for more concrete 'practical' action. In the same way that land clearing and controlled burns attempt to master nature while leaving larger relationships and interests untouched, so the call for a more pragmatic relation to the environment allows for immediate action that costs nothing in terms of how we live, and remains blind to the larger relationships that harm us all. Enter Tony Abbot and his 'green army'.

Abbot's first major political speech as Opposition leader announced his 'green' credentials, understood as a more practical approach to the environment. Part of this approach involves creating a 'green army' of up to 15,000 troops who would tackle vegetation, riverbanks, feral animals and plants. This plan was immediately dismissed by many as simply a political stunt for green

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Green Army for a War
We Can't Win

Simon Cooper

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votes. Yet Abbot and the Liberal Party are masters of the cultural backlash, and it may be that his call for practical action resonates both with those frustrated with the high rhetoric of the Rudd government and those resentful of the call for limits to growth and prosperity. Of course one cannot help but be reminded of the Coalition's 'practical reconciliation', in the name of which the government invaded its own country, sending troops into the Northern Territory to force the hand of reconciliation. The language behind a green army suggests a similar approach, direct action on the targeted object, rather than with the human actors who are responsible for its degradation. Like the left-liberal approach to Indigenous issues, the long-term work involved in combating climate change is declared obsolete in favour of pragmatic action.

Irrespective of the degree of backlash around climate change, there remains a growing unease as we are forced to reckon with the consequences of environmental degradation. Last summer's bushfires have generated an air of seemingly constant anxiety; at times we almost border upon a state of emergency. Witness the linguistic inflation of fire warnings where adjectives compete to describe the daily situation, or the list of fifty-two towns under immediate possible threat. Within this climate, environmentalists who argue for the need to preserve bushland are categorised as naive or, even worse, as a kind of public enemy threatening our inalienable right to live wherever we want and do whatever we like to the land. At the same time, the very real sense that we might have to give up aspects of our way of life to combat climate change is starting to bite. If the best of humanity is often found in the response to an actual crisis, the forms of collective generosity and spirit in the wake of last year's fires being one example, the worst possibilities can manifest in the fear of a possible crisis—the solution to which may be beyond us. Such a culture of fear creates division rather than co-operation—a struggle and war for resources. What kind of mindset would flourish in a context where we disavow the impact of our way of life, while at the same time desperately attempting to hold onto it?

It is here that the language of a green army is able to resonate. The federal Coalition, abandoning even the policies they had under Howard, has fully become a party of resentment. Rejecting out of hand the importance of global co-operation, cries for pragmatic action remain trapped within an understanding of the environment that still wishes to master and exploit it. As such they provide for some a comforting image because they frame the environment within familiar categories. At the same time they fail utterly to engage with the task of transformation that lies ahead. One can only hope that the environment does not become just another culture war, allowing the scene of devastation outside Balook to become something other than an exceptional state of affairs. **a**



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ISSN 1039-1010 indexed and abstracted in the Bibliography of the Social Sciences.