Interpreting Postmodernity

By Mark Hearn*

Note: *this paper provides a brief history of postmodernity and, as an example of this historical moment, outlines how postmodernity has manifested in Australian politics through an adaptation of the Thatcherite principles of self-help and enterprise.*

In May 2006 Professor Henry Reynolds announced at the Sydney Writers Festival that 'the postmodernist movement has gone.' A postmodern interpretation of history, which focused on language and challenging historical truth, 'has had its day.' Postmodernism, Professor Reynolds argued, 'just goes round and round, with lots of lights and colours and doesn't get you anywhere', although he conceded that postmodernism had 'provided an interesting take on the language of history'. Professor Reynolds observed that 'We live in profoundly different times to 1980', suggesting that an historical moment, one conducive to postmodernist thinking, had passed. 'We [now] live in some ways in a terrifying world', in which 'old fashioned history and truth continue to have their great value and virtue.' (*Australian*, 27 May 2006)

What is striking is the essentially ahistorical nature of Reynolds' critiques of postmodernism, and others like it (Windschuttle, 1996, Clark 2004, Evans 2000). There appears to be an assumption that postmodernism spontaneously emerged in the 1970s, the product of philosophers and social scientists, pretentious and predominantly French, with nothing better to do than to annoy sensible people with their strange and self-indulgent ideas. Despite

Reynold's vague acknowledgement of 1980, there seems to be a lack of curiosity about why postmodernist ideas emerged at a particular historical moment. What historical forces had given rise to these ideas? Has that historical moment passed?

If we explore the historical moment of postmodernity we might discover how we can more cogently reflect, as historians, on the terrifying world that we inhabit. I agree with Professor Reynolds when he also observed in May 2006 that he believed that history had a purpose, which was to search for the truth: 'Truth is important. It always has to be partial, it always has to be as I see it, but that is what we have to search for.' As historians we search for the truth not only as a matter of technical accuracy, but for the ethical purpose of clearly facing what has happened in the past, and our to responsibility to overcome those circumstances - in the world that our interpretations may help to shape.

If we consider the forces and questions that helped shaped postmodernism, we might realise that postmodernism has a history. We might find that it is possible that western culture and ideas have confronted similar tensions in the past to those we associate with postmodernism - about the clash between certainty and relativism, about the conflict between plurality and the demands of totalising systems, and totalising explanations of history or human behaviour. Since the Enlightenment, perhaps since the Renaissance, according to some historians such as Stephen Toulmin, these tensions have persisted and periodically erupted into the open – in Romanticism, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; a hundred years later in the *fin de siècle* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the cultural sixties 1965-1975, which simultaneously stimulated postmodernism and the New Left, movements which have experienced a tense relationship (Anderson, 1998). The New Left flagged in the

early 1980s; Postmodernism flourished for another decade, not necessarily because it was a superior intellectual or political movement to the New Left. Postmodernism continued to flourish because of its historical nature, reflecting the breakdown of modernity, and a consciousness of a sense of breakdown, that unfolded as the century closed.

A short history of postmodernity

When did postmodernity begin? Lacking the book of Genesis to guide me, I am not as brave as Bishop James Ussher, who in 1658 confidently dated the creation of the world at 23 October 4004 BC. In *The Condition of Postmodernity* David Harvey suggests that postmodernism has a birthday, and he repeats the date offered by the architectural historian Charles Jencks, who nominated 3.32 p.m. on 15 July 1972, 'when the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St. Louis…was dynamited as an uninhabitable environment for the low-income people it housed.' (Harvey 1990 p.39; Jencks 2007) This housing development had been a prize-winning version of Le Corbusier's utopian and high modernist vision of the "machine for modern living", but by the 1970s the apostles of post-modernist architecture argued that such 'doctrinaire ideals' had to be abandoned, to be replaced by an embrace of a heterogeneous, and at times playful style that welcomed the popular, the vernacular and the kitsch. The postmodernists argued that 'it was time…to build for people rather than for Man.' (Harvey 1990 p.40) Harvey sees this symbolic moment in 1972 being prefigured by the cultural Sixties (whch Harvey dates as 1968-1972), whose counter-culture movement provided 'a cosmopolitan, transnational, and hence global movement of resistance to the hegemony of high modernist culture.' The counter-culture was 'antagonistic to the oppressive qualities of scientifically grounded technical-bureaucratic rationality as purveyed through

monolithic corporate, state, and other forms of institutionalised power (including that of bureaucratised political parties and trade unions).' (Harvey 1990 p.38)

Both Harvey and the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describe modernity as a quest of rational human organization attempting to prevail over the forces of irrationality, and the untamed force of nature. Harvey described 'the project of modernity' as 'the scientific domination of nature [that] promised freedom from scarcity, want, and the arbitrariness of natural calamity. The development of rational forms of social organization and rational modes of thought promised liberation from the irrationalities of myth, religion, superstition, release from the arbitrary use of power as well as from the dark side of our own human natures.' (Harvey 1990 p.12) In *Intimations of Postmodernity* Bauman described this project in terms of warfare:

> 'The war against mystery and magic was for modernity the war of liberation…It was the declaration of hostilities that made the unprocessed, pristine world into the enemy…The world was an *object* of *willed action*: a raw material in the work guided and given form by human designs.' Humans, like nature, would be…made hospitable for instrumental meanings.' (Bauman 1992 pp.x-xi)

It is our consciousness of the failure of the ambitions of the modern project that has led to our self-consciously postmodern moment. Global capitalism seems to have defeated all political rivals, while seemingly unable to rein in its inequities and propensity for environmental destruction: a rational project with increasingly irrational outcomes. As the second part of

this paper argues, the politics of postmodernity seems to embrace this sense of liberated 'enterprise' by throwing the responsibilities of governance onto the individual.

Noting the distinction between modernity and the cultural movement of modernism, Zygmunt Bauman argues that modernism represented modernity confronting itself with its own impossibility, paving the way for the postmodern moment (Bauman 1991 pp.4-5). Modernism may have emerged sometime around December 1910, a moment when Virginia Woolf felt that human character changed; or had it? Harvey argues that the modern project was always accompanied by the irrational and natural forces it tried to contain and control, and which found expression in modernism – in Eliot's *The Wasteland*, and the alienation evident in Dix's nightmares of Weimar Germany, or Magritte's masked faces. Characteristics of postmodernity may have always shadowed the modern movement.

Harvey describes modernity as a force of creative destruction, seeking rational development while also generating its own chaos and destructiveness. Discussing Nietzsche, Harvey observes that 'the modern was nothing more than a vital energy, the will to live and to power, swimming in a sea of disorder, anarchy, destruction, individual alienation, and despair.' (Harvey 1990 p.15) As a poster, "Who Are Our Enemies?" from the Soviet Union warned its citizens in the 1930s, the communist state, one of the most ambitious manifestations of the modern project, could apparently only liberate its citizens by the identification and elimination of enemies, even at the risk of destroying those whom the revolutionary process was suppose to offer freedom (Gulag History web site). The potential for disorder and anarchy had to be suppressed by a process of turbulent eradication, focused by the will to power: the system's victims had to be identified and purged as enemies of the state, or

perhaps identified as 'Kulaks' – that is 'Others', useful Others, who could be rendered hospitable for the system's instrumental meanings and symbolic victimisation. As Simon Sebag Montefiore has found in Stalin's papers, not even the general secretary was sure how to define a 'kulak', not that it really mattered (Montefiore 2004 p.47). Once gathered and condemned, they would, for the most part, not be put to death, but to work, fulfilling a central role in the Soviet system's political and economic imperatives, and in its cycle of "creative" destruction, as Anne Applebaum has so harrowingly revealed in *Gulag*: by the 1950s, eighteen million Soviet citizens struggled in forced labour to produce a third of the Soviet Union's gold, much of it coal and timber, and many other industrial and agricultural products. (Applebaum 2004 pp.15-16).

Stephen Toulmin in *Cosmopolis* suggests a similar interpretation to Harvey, when he sees the death of modern rationality as 'our awakening from a transient, ambiguous daydream' that had persisted for much of the twentieth century. Toulmin also argues that the cultural Sixties marked a key moment when the modern project was displaced by a revival of renaissance-style humanism, an assertion of the needs of ecology over technology and progress, an embrace of more democratic forms of art and culture, and that one's emotional life need no longer be logical and calculated: 'at last you were free to confess to confused intentions or ambiguous feelings'; 'for the generation of the 1960s, that undervaluation of the emotions was at an end.' (Toulmin 1992 pp.160-67, 172, 201)

The cultural Sixties was part of the process of revealing postmodernity, revealing enduring historical tensions as the modern project failed under the weight of its contradictions; so too was the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, which represented not only the collapse of the Soviet

empire, but of the old political certainties of right and left, inaugurated with the modern discourse of politics since the French Revolution. As Bauman argues, the collapse of communism 'ushered us in to an as-yet-unexplored world: a world without a collective utopia, without a conscious alternative to itself.' (Bauman 1992 p.xxv) Into that political and cultural vacuum poured confusion, stress and irony; we might enjoy the playful and at time troubling games of the artists Cindy Sherman or Tracey Moffatt, imagining new identities, and free to express their cultivated ambiguities; and we were confronted with new expressions of the vicious and the mendacious, such as the gang of carpet baggers who seized the assets of the crumbling Soviet state. The new citizens of the Russian Federation could now have the luxury of Macdonalds, free speech and freezing to death in the doorways of decaying apartment buildings, or even freezing inside the buildings, as the State was increasingly unwilling or unable to pick up the bill for the central heating or repair the broken pipes. In the former Yugoslavia once good friends and neighbours took the opportunity to murder each other in a frenzy of sectarian tribalism. How could the members of this apparently rational community, in the heart of Europe, as we, the stunned, appalled and utterly passive global audience were so often reminded, turn so quickly and so brutally upon each other? There was no rebirth of humanism in Bosnia in the 1990s. The old irrationalities and rivalries, which had remained present as the close companion of the modern project, emerged from the shadows. Postmodernity need not result in the assertion of new forms of consciousness, politics or culture: it may provide a space for the revival of older forms of power and identity, and more elaborate manifestations of disorder, anarchy and destruction.

The historian Jonathan Clark, in his book *Our Shadowed Present*, sees postmodern forces at work in recent decades, which he argues are depoliticising history and indeed depoliticising

contemporary politics. Rather than exploring the historical tensions at work that might be driving this subversive transformation, Clark blames postmodernist theorists and historians, and in so doing ascribes an extraordinary degree of influence to them. Clark argues that 'consumption' at the heart of the postmodernist 'vision', and 'the commercialisation of culture'; 'The politics of class, based on production, everywhere gives way to the politics of cultural identity, built around consumption.' Postmodernism is 'a rejection of the historical' that excludes the possibility of emancipatory knowledge. Truth and history are assimilated to myth, fiction, advertising and propaganda. Postmodernism represents 'presentism', where the lessons of the past are forgotten. (Clark 2004 pp.3-7)

As an example of this process, Clark cites the Blair Government's decision to build the Millenium Dome: 'instructions were given that the Dome contain no reference to the national past, or to the person whose anniversary was commemorated. The Dome accurately captured a movement.'. (Clark 2004 p.6) Did the Dome capture the influence of an intellectual movement, or an historical moment? An historical moment when, for political purposes, a form of 'presentism' was exulted, although its acolytes were not unfortunately mere theorists in universities or elsewhere, but were powerful politicians who have embraced 'consumption' and 'the commercialisation of culture'. Clark has little curiosity about what has really shaped the historical and political forces of postmodernity.

Changing the Culture: Australian Postmodernity

In Australia, postmodernity has most sharply manifested not in a revival of humanism, but in a turn to neo-liberalism - a discourse at once familiar, but also continuing to evolve. Along with Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, the Australian Prime Minister John Howard was one

of the world's most successful advocates of what we might now more clearly understand as postmodern politics. From 1984, an early moment in the postmodern era, Howard determined to seize control of Liberal Party industrial relations policy, and recast it in deregulated, neo-liberal terms, with a focus on self-regulation through a regime of voluntary and individualised employment contracts. It is necessary to remember that at that historical moment, the loyal members of the industrial relations club – unions, lawyers and industrial judges, employer organizations and the Hawke Labor government - were only then settling in to the comfortable world of the Prices and Incomes Accord. The Accord was an expression of the principles of liberal interventionism that had characterised Australian politics since federation in 1901: a limited form of government intervention designed to unite the nation to the cause of economic growth, an inclusive intervention designed to appeal to business, unions and employees alike (Kelly, 1992; Hearn 2005). In fulfilment of these aims, the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission seemed secure as an unchallengeable instrument of the Commonwealth's regulation of work. The 'New Right' advocates of neo-liberalism, Australia's version of America's neo-conservatives, had not yet emerged to support Howard's initiative. Despite apparently swimming against the current of history, John Howard remained focused on this policy transformation throughout his subsequent career, understanding that changing industrial relations policy was the Trojan Horse through which vast areas of economic and social policy could be captured and colonised.

Howard instinctively understood, as a vital accompaniment to that policy transformation, the key postmodern proposition articulated by Margaret Thatcher: there is no such thing as society. Margaret Thatcher expressed that proposition in an interview in October 1987, and it

was published in an article whose title was pregnant with a darkly playful prophecy of a new era of creative destruction: 'Aids, education and the year 2000!' Thatcher was self-consciously projecting towards the future, and specifically breaking with a discredited past.

> I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand "I have a problem, it, it is the Government's job to cope with it!" or … "I am homeless, the Government must house me!" and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves…
> (Margaret Thatcher Foundation)

For Margaret Thatcher, the rational interventions of modernity and government represented by the welfare state had failed, a claim strengthened by the failure of the modern state to adapt to new circumstances. In the space opened by that failure, Thatcher projected Britain towards a new era of self-help, self-management and self-creation, but she did not do so ahistorically, nor by consciously absorbing postmodernist theory. Thatcher reached back before modernity, to the mid nineteenth principles of *laissez-faire* and private charity, which she specifically recommended in the interview, cultivating a new, 'advanced liberalism', as Rose argues (Rose 1999). Clearing the slate for her politics, Thatcher necessarily recontested the struggle between past and present, a struggle to shape and control the future. In the atomised social realm of Thatcherite postmodernity you may reshape your identity, you can look after yourself, but you will be on your own, burdened with the weight of your own

representations, and by the responsibility of your own performance indicators. As Zygmunt Bauman argues, this process involves not only a privatisation of responsibility, but a privatisation of fears. '…Thus men and women have been left alone with their fears; they are told by philosophers that the void is here to stay, and by politicians that coping with it is their own duty and worry.' (Bauman 1992 p.xviii) As Margaret Thatcher declared at the end of the interview: 'You are responsible for your own behaviour!'

John Howard shared and exulted in the principle of self-management. Howard understood, as he argued in a speech delivered in July 2005, that he was engaged not simply in a conventional political debate, but in a cultural struggle to create a neoliberal society through the manipulation of language and policy, and the restructuring of institutions. A society of 'enterprise workers' geared to the new opportunities provided by the globalised economy after the end of the Cold War. 'Those of us who have long made the case for freeing up the Australian labour market always felt that the most important change would be a cultural one. Change the institutions and over time you change the culture.' (Howard, 'Workplace Relations Reform')

Howard described how these enterprise workers had organically arisen and spread throughout the workforce, and in the process transforming the culture and identity of the workforce:

> These Australians do not fit neatly into categories based on age or
> geography, occupation or industry, income level or formal qualification.
> They are white collar and blue collar. They work each day in our factories,
> our small businesses, our great services companies, our farms and our

mines. Some choose to be trade unionists, many do not. Most are traditional employees, while a growing number have embraced the independence and flexibility of working for themselves.

Embracing deregulation, Howard overplayed his hand with the WorkChoices reforms of 2005, but they represent, even in a sanitised form, an enduring legacy. While the Rudd Labor Government elected in November 2007 will claim to substantially recast WorkChoices, it is unlikely that the overall policy direction will change.

The Australian Labor Party's industrial relations policy seems structured to maintain the deregulatory spirit of WorkChoices. Labor proposes restrictions on union workplace organising, restrictions on the right to strike and a policy of 'flexibility clauses', which may spread the deregulated idea of WorkChoices individual employment contracts (Australian Workplace Agreements) into the traditional award system, although cushioned by the imposition of provisions to protect employee entitlements. Labor also promises to shut down the Australian Industrial Relations Commission - the former Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, and a product of modernity whose historical moment has passed. Labor proposes replacing the AIRC with a workplace authority which is likely to be charged with a less interventionist mission. Embracing these changes, Labor not only feels the pressure of its short-term political requirements. Embracing deregulation also seems to move with the future and into the realm of enterprise workers, where some choose to be union members, and many do not. Australian trade union membership is now 20% of the workforce and 15% of the private sector workforce, the sector in which the vast majority of Australian workers are employed. In the process of these changes the union relationship with the state, a key element

of the modern liberal state, has been abandoned – at least by those renovating the state. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is leading Labor towards the postmodern world. Yet trade union structure, policy and identity seem unwilling to acknowledge that this fundamental transition is underway. Australian trade unions seem unwilling to come to terms with postmodernity.

Opponents of John Howard, including from within the labour movement, liked to characterise the defeated prime minister as a picket fence man pining for the 1950s. It is the leaders of the Australian trade union movement who pine for the 1950s, and the familiar and modern certainties of high rates of unionisation in an industrial economy. According to the structure of the trade union movement in 2008, the economy in which it organises remains a familiar and modern industrial economy, dominated by the manufacturing sector, as you might have experienced in the 1950s, when unionisation reached 60% of the workforce, one of the highest rates in the world.

The trade union movement was one of the most efficient instruments of the modern Australian liberal state. This identification with the state was defined through the set of rules which each union accepted as a registered organization under the Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1904, and which listed the classifications of membership and industrial coverage for each union. These rules both defined the union relationship with the state and formed a vital component in defining trade union identity: that this act of registration was also an act of recognition, that trade union function was accepted as a legitimate activity within the modern Australian polity (Hearn 2008). As Bauman suggests, state sanctioned rules provided a 'geometry of order', helping to ease if not eliminate the ambiguities and tensions of trade union organization within the liberal State (Bauman, 1991, p.15).

But the world cannot be constituted as geometrical grids, nor rendered free from ambiguity. With the end of the Cold War, the liberal capitalist state no longer required the mechanisms it had maintained to resist the spread of communism or left-wing radicalism. The postmodern and neo-liberal state no longer required a formal, structural relationship with the trade union movement. Postmodernity did not destroy the forms and signs of state-sanctioned trade union registration: it revealed their fragility and artificiality, their ambiguity and transient nature, elements which were always present in these apparently fixed and stable structures.

Conclusion

In the conclusion of *Cosmopolis* Stephen Toulmin suggests that we have a choice: we might either face the future, which demands 'novel ideas and more adaptive institutions', or we might move backwards into the future, 'hoping that the modes of life and thought typical of the age of stability and nationhood may survive at least for our own lifetimes.' (Toulmin 1992 p.203) In *What is History For?* Beverley Southgate urges historians to embrace postmodernity: its 'chaotic *dis*-order …is…to be accepted as both inevitable and positively welcome; it is something, with all its ambivalence and insecurity, that is not be feared but celebrated.' Southgate argues that we need not abandon historical practice but reconstitute it. We need a 'therapeutic' history 'that helps us think about the nature and limits of our present, about the conditions under which [what] we take for *truth and reality* [Southgate emphasis] has been established.' (Southgate 2005 pp.88, 123)

Thinking about what this 'therapeutic' history might look like in relation to the dilemmas faced by the trade union movement, it is possible to imagine a history of solidarity that asked

men and women working today for their reflections on their experience of work, and their reflections on union values and organization. Some of these men and women may be union members: many of them may not, and the historian would be compelled to consider that disengagement, and what it suggests of the historical phenomenon of union solidarity – why has it been so readily displaced? How were its values and practices constructed? How were its adherents rendered hospitable for instrumental meanings? Who were included in the embrace of solidarity, and who were excluded? This history would not be the depoliticised 'presentism' opposed by Jonathan Clark. It would be a history of the present as urged by Michel Foucault in 1978: 'My problem is to construct myself, and to invite others to share an experience of what we are, not only our past but also our present, an experience of our modernity in such a way that we might come out of it transformed' (Foucault 2001 p.242; Flynn 2005 pp.290-95). The fractious and ambiguous narratives provided by those men and women might also lead us to conceive of a transformation, a future in which the union movement creatively reinvented the terms of its solidarity with its constituency; reinventing a sense of an imagined community, in both structure and moral mission. This future may not manifest as a 'collective utopia' but it might reflect a world presented with a conscious alternative to itself.

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