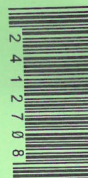


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I The Suckling Society

HUMPHREY McQUEEN

... you do not seem to have noticed the queer relationship between man and earth in Australia: how he treated her as a harlot, frenziedly raped her for her wealth—wool, gold, wheat; no wonder his conscience was uneasy, no wonder he was restless. The monuments he erected, the houses he gave his fellow men, the entertainments he provided—vulgar, meretricious, pretentious. It was beginning even in your time. Yes, and the swaggering, and the sensitivity to criticism—this was the behaviour of guilty men.

C. Manning Clark, *Meanjin*, 1943

It is clearly a hollow insight to say that what is wrong with Australia is that it is a capitalist society; yet this must be the starting-point for any meaningful analysis. There is no escaping the concentration of economic and political power; the alienation of work; and the acquisitive, competitive, aggressive values which penetrate deeply into our every human relationship.

If this chapter passes somewhat lightly over these topics, as well as over the plight of pensioners, the inequalities of education, and genocide in Vietnam, it is not because they are unimportant. It is rather because nothing meaningful can be said about them in a series of unconnected paragraphs. Something useful for remedying them might emerge from an essay which first seeks to identify the particular contours of our society. This will mean commencing with the peculiarities of Australian capitalism, which in turn will demand combining an analysis of the present with a discourse upon our past.

What's wrong with Australia is that it is an outpost of empire which, through a significantly fortuitous combination of factors, has resulted in a derivative, dependent and closed society. It will be necessary to define briefly these three terms:

derivative—derived from another society and place in such a way as to seriously impede the evolution of an appropriate relationship with our geographic and political surroundings;
dependent—flows on from the derivativeness, in the sense of seeking innovations from outside our environment rather than through creative adaptations to it;
closed—indicates the absence of an internal critique and is based on the repressively homogeneous nature of Australian society.

There is presumably nothing intrinsically undesirable in a society being 'derivative', 'dependent' and 'closed'. It obviously involves the value of what we derive from, of what we depend upon and of what we are closed against. The remainder of the chapter will be concerned to indicate why these things have been undesirable in our particular case.

AUSTRALIAN POLITICS

Australia was established as a trading and refitting station for British capitalism at the outset of the Industrial Revolution. That it was also a penal colony was secondary to this purpose, though its penal status has had one lasting effect upon Australia's development in that it has meant that from 26 January 1788 onwards there has been a strong central administration whose function it has been to fashion a society around it.

This is extremely unusual, as it is generally the changing nature of a society which brings forth a state: in Australia the process was reversed, with tremendous consequences for our total development. The state apparatus has stood as the backbone of our tame-cat unionism, which is dependent on arbitration, and of our timid business sector with its demands for tariff protection.

Undoubtedly, the most important factor sustaining Australia's political stability and social passivity has been the nature of our major exports: wool and minerals (especially gold). Both brought high prices, yet required little investment compared to the returns obtained, so that high wages could be paid in any economy which also had a chronic labour shortage. The one major export—sugar, which was a low profit yielder, broke our homogeneity with the mass importation of island labourers, until the state intervened with a protective tariff in 1904.

Thus Australia has been a rich, white outpost of the British Empire; after 1941 it merely transferred across to United States imperialism, which values our stability in a world in which it is increasingly difficult to guarantee uninterrupted supplies of raw materials which are essential to US attempts to dominate world trade.

This has meant that for almost the entire period of our existence as a European settlement Australia has been the privileged possession of the world's leading capitalist nation. We have occupied a side table in a revolving restaurant on top of the world; unlike almost every other society, we have never been in the lift, let alone in the scullery. So many of the things which could be said to be right with Australia have been purchased by the triumphs and sufferings of others. It is possible to be satisfied with Australia only if one is prepared to ignore the price which others have paid for our comfort. Our standards of living have been exacted from the less fortunate members of the imperialist system in Africa. Even our freedoms were frequently secured in England and transported here free of charge to our social stability. We have largely avoided the pains of the industrialization which underlay both British and US power and have so far contributed only marginally to the costs of their decline.

Not that Australia has escaped unscathed from its umbilical attachment to triumphant imperialism. Two of our most noticeable characteristics—racism and materialism—are grounded in the ideology of Victorian England. Both became more intense in Australia: racism because of direct contact with such non-Europeans as Aborigines and Chinese; materialism because the gold-engendered prosperity encountered no cushioning by alternate secular or religious life-styles. Aboriginal culture was relentlessly destroyed and any Rousseauian notion that it might contain a cure for the ills of the Old World was quickly discarded by a land-hungry bourgeoisie which saw itself as the solution to rather than as the cause of the world's ills. The failure of the monastic Benedictines to administer the Catholic Church in Australia underscores this point.

The protest movements in Australia are frequently accused of imitating American trends, and this is undeniable. We have read Marcuse and Chomsky in American

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paperback editions and organized freedom rides, teach-ins and moratoria within weeks of these occurring in the United States. We campaign for the release of American political detainees and import American speakers. It is true that we are derivative and dependent in our protests, but it is more significant that Australia is derivative and dependent on the things that we protest against. If the protest movement derives from American examples, it is largely because Australian society derives from outside Australia. The Australian Left could more easily do without its imported ideas than could our opponents do without their foreign capital and military alliances. The Left could give up Mao and Marcuse more readily and successfully than Santamaria could give up the Pope.

At an intellectual level our attachment to the world's dominant powers has been disastrous. Not only has Australia shared in the material benefits of imperialism, it has shared its language as well. If Australians had spoken a minor European language—as in Latin America—there would be more resilience to our artistic impulse and more vigour in our political dissent. But as English speakers we have had no barrier to deflect direct penetration and few national well-springs for regeneration.

He was always recalling what Flinders Petrie says somewhere: 'A colony is no younger than the parent country.' Perhaps it is even older, one step further gone.

D.H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, 1923

Isolated in the sense of being cut off from the ferment of Europe (Asia did not exist, except to menace) we were unable to benefit from the peculiar strengths of isolation because we were open to every English and subsequently every American vogue. Australia has no film industry largely for this reason. When post-1945 migrants could have made severe dints in this isolation, they were unable to compete with the increase in transmission of radio and television. Indeed many of the social transformations in dress and diet which are attributed to migrants are the consequence of American advertising campaigns. Instant coffee came to Australia because of the marketing requirements of Maxwell House, and not because Italians drink the vile stuff.

Australia is not a society in its own right, and can never be understood by searching for the truly genuine Australian essence. Many of the flaws in our way of life can be seen most vividly by imagining what we would be like if our society had evolved here over the last thousand years. Would we eat and dress the way we do? Our standards of decency in beachwear collapsed under the assault of European fashion and films and not because Australians adapted to their environment.

It might be argued that the size of a bathing-costume is of little consequence compared to nakedness and poverty. Certainly this is undeniable, but this kind of example has two levels of force. Firstly, it is part of the oppressiveness of everyday life in the modern world. When the central city area in Canberra was closed to traffic the old streets were painted with swirling white lines. Children were heard to ask if they were supposed to walk only on these lines. In other words, their education had conditioned them to look for rules rather than for joy. That this is a condition of most societies makes it no less a cause for complaint about Australia. Indeed the absence of alternate life-styles and of a critical cultural tradition makes the repressiveness of daily living far worse here. Secondly, our inappropriate dress and diet remind us how completely we remain an Anglo-Saxon outpost.

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Nowhere is this dependence more debilitating than in political debate. The anti-theoretical nature of Australian political life finds its primary origin in the practical success of Australian capitalism because of its special position within the imperialist system. People become interested in theory as a distinct activity when they encounter problems which cannot be resolved (let alone solved) in practice. A fairly consistent standard of well-being and the immunity from the direct ravages of war have meant that Australians have avoided prolonged periods of intense self-questioning.

Significantly, sociology has had a broken and tenuous existence as an academic discipline in Australia, with undergraduate courses becoming widely available only in the late 1960s. Australia was barely studied at all in schools and universities until the 1940s, when the imperialist balance in the Pacific was upset by Japan and then by the United States. Before this, Australian history was very correctly taught as part of imperial history.

Our attachment to the most successful capitalist nations has reinforced this quietism and we have been heir to their self-satisfied empiricism. In as much as Australian conservatives have a coherent outlook, it derives from jurisprudence, albeit a muddle-headed extrapolation of the Common Law. In other words, conservative ideology in Australia is nothing more than the day-by-day memory-bank of a property-based society.

Far more common is the philosophy of mindless action, as epitomized by the Country Party and the RSL but pervasive of our entire political culture, not excluding the revolutionary Left. Doubtless, some of this derives from the practical manly virtues of a frontier society and military life, so much lauded by certain historians.

Lack of water drove the brumbies down from the hills. A mob of fifty used to water at the dam. They broke down fences and destroyed the new wheat crop. In the end the farmer and his sons drove them into a yard. One morning only a colt and his mother were left in the yard. . . . The colt was three days old. He moved about on long brittle legs . . . His mother . . . was small and scrubby. . . . The mare and colt were of no use as stock horses.

Presently a man came and cracked a whip. The mare quivered. The colt came in close to her side. Then the whip stung her on the flank. She sprang forward. The whip flayed her sides. It urged her ahead. It guided her towards the race. She galloped into the race and the colt followed. The whip cracked behind. She saw the bush ahead and plunged forward, whinnying. As she came out into the open the man made ready. He held a shear blade bound on a long stick. He plunged it into the mare's neck, above the chest. The mare threw up her head and jumped to one side. Then the man plunged the blade into the colt's neck. He reared. The mare whinnied and sprang away and the colt followed. Blood came out on the mare's chest. It came out in jets. A sheet of it ran down her chest and covered her legs. Blood ran out of the colt's chest, also. They ran a mile up into the hills. Before long the mare began to weaken. Her knees wavered. She whinnied in her distress. Blood bubbled in the wound in her throat. Then she pitched forward. She lay still, but when she heard the colt stumble and fall near her side she tried to lift her head up. She succeeded in raising it a few inches. Then her head fell back heavily as though borne down by a heavy weight.

If they had killed the brumbies in the yard they would have had to burn the bodies.

Dal Stevens, *Southerly*, 1940

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On the political Right this proclivity to action is the prelude to violence against those who deviate from the narrow norms of Australian virtue. Thus sex-offenders are to be flogged and political opponents jailed or punched. The assumption is that since every problem is not really a problem at all, and thus does not require detailed dissection, the simplest solution will suffice: drug-taking will disappear if everyone has a hair-cut; hippies will be made into men by military service; Communism will go away when a few heads are broken.

For small-l liberals and Labor Party reformers this anti-theoretical approach produces piecemeal social tinkering. Each problem is seen as separate from every other problem. Solutions are sought one at a time, which means that the symptoms are treated and the disease ignored. By concentrating on welfare programmes the reformer bypasses the need to engage in the full-scale exploration of society which could reveal the essence of capitalist exploitation. By banging his head against the wall of concrete issues the reformer convinces himself that society is solid, never suspecting that solidity is a species of movement.

Even in the particular solutions offered, the Labor Party responds in the typically Australian way of extending state activity. Only rarely has the non-Marxist Left in Australia appreciated the essentially repressive nature of all state activities under capitalism. Usually state action has been treated as if it was socialism, and a mere handful of anarchists, and guild socialists like Maurice Blackburn, has seen the human horror of welfare-statism. Notions of group self-reliance for the deprived are entertained only where a group, such as the Gurindjis, has demonstrated its ability to act cohesively, and even then everything possible is done to force them back into the mesh of social-welfare programmes and thus deprive them of their group initiative. The reverse is true for those who have wealth and power; the state apparatus is placed at their disposal to build roads and bridges, lower municipal rates and arrange finance. Some Labor leaders have even managed to consider this to be socialism!

On the extreme Left there remains a reluctance to face up to the demands of theory. The Communist Party has never completely outgrown its origins as an expression of trade-union militancy. While this was put partly into its proper proportion after 1930, the dominant 'Marxism' which followed was Stalin's counter-revolutionary drivel, so that theory remained as remote as ever from the practice of Australian Communism. All that had been added was a more rigorous vision of the class nature of capitalism and the Depression probably would have achieved that much. The Communist Party was still essentially directed towards increasing organizational activity for its own sake. Communist trade-union activity has been grounded on the ability of Communist officials to work harder than anybody else at trade-union affairs, that is, on their ability to avoid revolutionary politics.

For the younger, and occasionally newer Left, theory has too often been a substitute for action; a rationalization of selfish life-styles; a mechanism for exorcising the troublesome. On the basis of one or two translations in some overseas journal entire political edifices are constructed in homage to new European gods, so that the production of a newspaper or magazine to express the new line becomes essential. Theory is thus avoided in the flurry-flurry of editorial duties. Or alternatively, theory is seen as a guide to action, that is, as something external and subservient to action, rather than as an essential part of revolutionary activity.

In other forms of expression this self-same physical pre-eminence is to be found.

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Australians have excelled in sport, ballet and singing. The most widely acceptable genre of our literature is that of action; only recently have psychological novelists like Patrick White gained recognition here, and this followed reluctantly in the wake of overseas acclaim.

In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes, in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves, the buttocks of cars grow hourly glassier, food means cake and steak, muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves.

Patrick White, *Australian Letters*, 1958

As a bridging passage it should be useful to recapitulate the dominant themes presented thus far. Firstly, dependence and derivativeness are unavoidable to some degree, so that it must be the extent of our indebtedness which is of concern. Secondly, and far more importantly, it is the content of what we have taken over that is reprehensible. We have inherited and willingly adopted the worst aspects of triumphant capitalism.

The full impact of this will be revealed by turning to the third theme—Australia as a closed society. This has been hinted at already, but it needs to be read back into the preceding pages for them to gain their maximum validity.

Undoubtedly, the commonest cliché about Australia concerns its alleged classlessness. Yet by anybody's definition Australia is not a classless society: a minority owns the means of production, while the vast majority have nothing to sell but their labour; there are enormous differences in income; education, housing, entertainments and employment opportunities vary enormously in terms of quantity, and sometimes quality.

It is too easy to dismiss claims about classlessness as demonstrable nonsense. That so many observers have talked of Australia as a classless society means that there is something which demands elucidation. That something is the absence of totally disparate life-styles, complete with articulate political-cultural apparatus. It is the absence of vestigial feudalism in Australia which impresses, since in most European societies the bourgeoisie has acquired at least some of the accoutrements of rank and style. The best Australia can manage are double knighthoods for prodigious money-making and services to tax-deductable sports. The simple fact is that Australia came into existence after the defeat of feudalism, so that we have no alternate cultural source, such as even a new society like the United States has in its Old South, from which a critique of a society founded on the cash-nexus could be drawn.

Very schematically, the position could be put as follows: Australia is a class society in terms of property, a classless society in terms of life-style, and a one-class society in terms of aspirations. All three aspects exist only because of the favourable position Australia has occupied in the imperialist system, so that *any analysis of class structure in Australia must begin by placing Australia into the class structure of imperialism and not merely from an analysis of the internal class structure.*

Religion, which is the usual source of untamed political ideas, has been equally barren in Australia. Protestantism everywhere is largely devoid of conscious theo-

logy and offers at best a practical guide to living. Catholicism in Australia has been of the anti-intellectual pre-Renaissance variety inherited from Ireland in which not even priests concerned themselves with ideas, a subject to which the Pope was granted exclusive rights rather than his proclaimed mere infallibility. For Protestants and Catholics alike, religion has been something one did, a formula to be enacted. Theology was a matter of practice. The conduct of art unions and housie-housie to sustain school-building programmes precluded theological concerns for the Catholic.

The Protestant was cut off from the one surviving strand of European culture when the secular Education Acts were introduced around 1880. The intellectual vacuum was only partly filled by imperial patriotism, which is now totally irrelevant and almost universally disregarded. A diluted notion of service and a series of prohibitions are all that remain. A significant result was that the bulk of English literature with its classical and Biblical allusions became increasingly incomprehensible to an expanding proportion of school children. This in turn meant that they were cut off from probably the one remaining area of critical Anglo-Saxon culture—its literature.

The destruction of Aboriginal society and rigidly Anglo-Saxon immigration meant that there was no ethnic minority from which a critique could come, although Santamaria demonstrates the potential. Anglo-Australians like Richard Mahony were the closest to a counter-perspective that appeared in the nineteenth century. Most overseas visitors ecstatically reported the progress Australia was making towards perfecting the bourgeois ideal. Australia is structurally one of the few completely capitalist societies ever produced. Land, which is almost universally granted a special status, became nothing more than transferable property under the Torrens title system. The gold-rush generation which dominated nineteenth-century Australia was overwhelmingly *petit-bourgeois* in origin, and more especially in its idea of what constituted the good life.

Nor did the beginnings of an industrial proletariat in the twentieth century provide sufficient basis for a root-and-branch critique of Australian values. Such criticisms as did appear were partial in their concerns and frequently advocated nothing more than an increase in physical comforts, that is, they reinforced the underlying appeals of existing society. Artists and others who identified with an international community were discontented, but like the *Vision* group in the early 1920s they remained rootless and so were incapable of deepening their critique by integrating it with a social group whose interests were in some degree in opposition to those the society proclaimed.

Communist intellectuals were busy making out that Australia was an exploited colony in the same position as India or China and so did not even commence to grapple with the problems of devising a revolutionary strategy for an imperialist outpost. This was not due to some intrinsic weakness of Communist intellectuals but was a function of the historical position of the entire proletariat which by British standards was an aristocracy of labour. Moreover, it was not until after 1940 that secondary industry became a significant segment of our economy, so that the proletariat remained numerically small as well as geographically fragmented.

The absence of consciously experienced divisions in our development has resulted in such social criticism as has been produced being restricted to a populist vision in which the overwhelming majority of Australians are seen to unite in opposition

AUSTRALIAN POLITICS

to a tiny (often foreign) group of would-be oppressors. Poets of protest subscribe to this conception of social reality, whilst radical historians have been far too busy celebrating Australia's past to believe in the need for a critical analysis of it.

It has only been in the last few years, in the wake of the forces which are breaking up imperialism throughout the world, that the pre-conditions for a real critique of Australian society have appeared. Women's Liberation, Gay Liberation and Black Power are quintessentially un-Australian and thus hopefully they will provide the catalysts for a sustained revelation of the assumptions of Australian society. But clearly the most significant forces are those which are straining Australia's linkages with the imperialist system, namely the movements for national liberation. These are undermining the stability and privilege upon which Australia has rested. Although serious divisions have always existed within Australia, it has been the divisions between Australia and the outside world which have usually been the most influential. This will intensify as Papua New Guinea becomes our own Ulster.

What does this sudden uneasiness mean,
and this confusion? (How grave the faces have become!)
Why are the streets and squares rapidly emptying,
and why is everyone going back home so lost in thought?

Because it is night and the barbarians have not come.
And some men have arrived from the frontiers
and they say that barbarians don't exist any longer.

And now, what will become of us without barbarians?
They were a kind of solution. C.P. Cavafy, *Four Greek Poets*, 1966

Australia does not have even the virtues of its vices. It has neither the values of genuine internationalism nor the strengths of thorough isolation; there is not even much superficial cosmopolitanism to relieve the dung-dreary mindscape. Instead there are all the worst elements of imperial chauvinism, intensified by geographic proximity to Asia. Equally, we lack the virtues of a truly classless society, as well as missing out on the vitality and colour that can arise from class tension and consciousness.

This situation derives from Australia's peculiar position as the pampered possession of successive imperialist powers. Changes have already begun within Australia because imperialism is breaking up into a polycentric system. First Britain, and now the United States, have been toppled from the position of primacy and there is no nation capable of taking up where they left off.

The fall of Singapore in 1942 is paralleled by the Tet Offensive in Vietnam in 1968. It is no longer possible for Australia to look upon Asia as a geographic inconvenience. It may be that Australia will become attached economically to Japan, thereby breaking two of our long-standing anchor chains: Japan is not Anglo-Saxon and cannot afford a privileged client. Our culture would be buffeted by non-English speakers and customs, and our economic position would be far less splendid than it has been at almost any time since 1830.

Precise consequences of these changes are inevitably difficult to chart: White Australia should go, but racial resentment could increase; class struggles on economic issues will deepen, but class consciousness is a far more difficult and tortuous

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FURTHER READING
B. Dawe, *The*
F. Hardy, *The*
D. Ireland, *The*
T. Kemp, *The*
E. Kisch, *The*
H. McQueen, *The*
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J. Playford, *The*
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achievement. Of one thing we can be certain—the 1970s will see a further loosening of the imperialist joints, although this may be accompanied by an immediate tightening of political and economic screws. In whatever proportion these occur, there will be ample scope for conscious revolutionary intervention to help make the breaks final.

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