Rewriting Australia[1]

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Why should we rewrite Australia? Is this not the kind of imperative that would be urged upon us, with compulsive enthusiasm, by those intellectuals who David Landes describes as the "semiotically aroused?" Are not Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines always in a process of rewriting? Can there ever be a singular narrative which, even in its contingency, forecloses on the Babel of other stories about place, origin, or destiny? Do we not, as intellectuals, at the very least take ideas, words too seriously?

I do not propose here to rewrite Australia, for it has in any case already been rewritten, in the form of a renewed narrative of fear and insecurity which looks, for the moment, to be enduring. Instead, I take three steps. *First*, I offer some background images of Australia as an ambivalent, insecure European presence in the South Pacific, edging on Asia. *Second*, I indicate some main tropes within which Australian history has been constructed. *Third*, and finally, I close in the present, with the new, liberal populism of the Howard Government, and its capture of the dominant narrative ground. The extraordinary hegemony of Howard's view of Australia combines its own novelties with a series of motifs that stretch back a century, where Australians are egalitarian *among themselves* and just possibly towards others, real or imaginary, where we might still be mates rather than citizens of the planet, where the best approach to the external environment is to keep it out. This is a culture of exclusion and fear.

Let me begin with some background images of Australia. It is New Zealand — Aotearoa — rather than Australia, which consistently holds the idea of *Godzone*, God's own country, the edenic paradise of Blake or Morris begun anew, afar. Images of Australia, in the beginning of contact, are less often hospitable. William Dampier, on touching

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the west coast of Australia, thought it was horrible. James Cook was better disposed, though Joseph Banks was happy to think that the place might actually be empty, the infamous *terra nullius* of the imperial gaze. Charles de Brosses, he who also inspired Marx's image of commodity fetishism with his 1767 study of the fetish, famously imagined the antipodes as a sewer through which metropolitan effluent could be evacuated. Jeremy Bentham imagined New South Wales as the site for the panopticon, a point that we like to draw to the attention of our francophilic graduate students: *no antipodes*, no Bentham, no panopticon, *no Foucault*. Australians, and even more emphatically New Zealanders, viewed themselves a hundred years ago as Britons. Into the twentieth century, New Zealand's motto was "Better Britain," as against Great Britain, while the Australian project was self-described as one of *independent Australian Britons* (the hyphens had arrived, multiple identities already, a hundred years ago).

The logic of being British, colonial, and convict all meant that early images of Australia were negative and derivative rather than positive or foundational. Ours was not a glorious new start or new dawn. Australia, first as colonies, then as a Federation, was an accident, a new world nation of a kind built without a myth of foundation or a myth of mission. Compare Australia to the new world experience of America and the difference is evident. Australia was built with hesitance, without enthusiasm, without boosterism, and in a specific, modern, sense — without industry. Americans were always going somewhere; Australians are simply there, wanting to be left alone.

Thus the powerful twentieth century literary theme of Australian *mediocrity*. Visitors to the antipodes later in the nineteenth century and over the cusp of the twentieth, viewed Australia as *the world's social laboratory of policy experiment*. Leading reformers from the continent and Britain routinely visited the antipodes to learn about social institutions such as Arbitration and to contemplate southern initiatives in women's suffrage. Alongside this policy motif, the more powerful cultural message remained Anglophilic — the convict stain narrative. Australians, here, were pathetic, if not criminal, culturally derivative, lazy, lethargic, mediocre, hopeless, reptilian. The clearest and most influential condensation of these views came with the six week visit of D. H. Lawrence to Australia and the publication of *Kangaroo* in 1923. The good seed of British Empire had on this view

been planted in the barren soil of the southland — little wonder that the fruits were disappointing. Lawrence, of course, harboured more ambivalence than this; if he was repelled by the antipodes, he was also world-weary of the old British empire, which had nothing like the *élan vital* that he desired. The point has less to do with the specificities of *Kangaroo* as a literary text, and more to do with the power of its motifs and the logic of its politics of representation. For the status accorded to *Kangaroo* made it clear that being Australian meant being told who, or what you were, a kind of double consciousness, viewing our world through the eyes of others. Thus the mythology persisted into the 1950's that while Australia had no literature, except the turd left us by this outside from the center, the *Kangaroo* turd of D.H. Lawrence. If you loved culture, the only response was equally clear — you had to get out, to leave, go, first of all to London. Australian intellectuals became expatriates.

Actually, there was one other alternative, though it was also unhappy. You could instead go for the politics of *denial*, or reversal – devalue all that the metropolis stood for, and value the local instead. The longstanding, and equally unhappy cultural alternatives became clear — British imperialism, or Australian chauvinism. There were very few voices, through the twentieth century, to take a distance on both these bad alternatives, to argue, as the cultural historian Bernard Smith did, that culture emerged from *traffic* rather than place, that the cultures of the centers were just as dependent on those of the peripheries as vice-versa. You can be as provincial in New York or New Haven, as you can in Melbourne, or Manila.

The question of writing Australia has therefore always been caught up with the question of Australian identity. The great divide became familiar — either we were displaced British, or uncultured yokels who could nevertheless make a pragmatic culture of survival at work. The exclusions from both these narratives are apparent. Australia's indigenous peoples have no place in either, except as residual signs of a disappearing primeval past, until the 1970's when aboriginal rights became a political issue and a certain romantic aboriginalism becomes apparent in film and advertising, where white Australians appropriate aspects of aboriginal culture as a way to connect with a land which they spent the previous two centuries trying to turn into England or America. Peoples other than Anglo-Celts also appear marginal,

though the arrival of multiculturalism into the 1970's has visibly shifted this, though again more in realms of visual representation in film and advertising than in the core institutions of power and influence. Australia is certainly less white than it used to be, though the stigmatization of others remains, and is merely shifted onto the latest arrivals, or detainees, as pariahs.

So much by way of background images. I turn now to the main tropes within which Australian history has been written across the twentieth century. It seems to me that, to simplify, there are five dominant tropes of Australian history since say 1900.

1. The Social laboratory/workingmens' paradise, c.1900-1920.
2. The most enduring — labour left nationalism/egalitarianism — say 1940-1970.
3. Radical denial of egalitarianism c.1970.
4. Leftwing social history/social sciences 1980 –
5. Centrality of racial exclusion 1990 –

1. The trope of the antipodes as the social laboratory I have already mentioned in connection with use of antipodes as a model for social policy into the twentieth century. This is as clear a case of cultural traffic from south to north as you could imagine. The influence of this thinking or of its project in Australia is clear, but partial. Across the antipodes Fabians or new liberals such as William Pember Reeves and H. B. Higgins sought openly to civilize capitalism, not least through the use of institutions such as Arbitration, where the just wage was to be decided not by markets or capitalist criteria but by needs, or labour criteria, via the agency of the third, middle class of social engineers and moderators. This narrative is badly undermined in the Great Depression, but revives and peaks in the period of postwar reconstruction in its labourist form. It is given a final, expanded spin by the Whitlam Government between 1972-1975, when the ambit of citizenship is opened and the historically racist profile of the parliamentary wing of labour is further distanced. Probably it is fair to say that the power of the social laboratory trope is overcome by its own success, or at least by the widely-shared relative prosperity of the postwar boom. For through all this longer period, from 1900 to 1950 and after, Australian political economy remains based on primary export commodities moderated by a degree of later import

substitution in automobiles and hard consumer durables like whitegoods. Into the 1960's, that is to say, Australia becomes known not least to itself as *The Lucky Country,* this captured in Donald Horne's 1964 book of the same title. Here came the postwar consumerist version of Lawrence's *Kangaroo* — Australians were hopeless, lazy, lethargic and extremely lucky, blessed by the terms of trade. Australia was a mindless, hedonistic utopia based on the endless consumption of beer and ice cream.

Like *The Lucky Country*, the earlier period title by William Lane, *The Workingman's Paradise* (1888) was, in fact ironic in its intent. Horne wanted to insist that our "natural" good fortune would become our unluck, when the primary commodity export boom collapsed, as it did. William Lane, for his part, wanted to make the point that Australia was no paradise for workers at all. In the 1890's times were so tough that they were forced, against their own good nature, to form a Labor Party, to enter the State; while Lane fled, not to London or the Ritz, but to Paraguay, to set up a new utopia which, significantly, he called New Australia, having decided that the old Australia was beyond redemption, thus, even before Federation a hundred years ago.

William Lane's New Australia in the *bush* of Paraguay failed. The image or vista of the social engineering project is logically *urban*, though its implications, in Australia as, say in the USA, with the Tennessee Valley Association, were also often rural or regional. It connected to the dreams and often bitter disappointments of soldier farm settlements, and later to the national-developmental project of the Snowy Mountains Energy Scheme, where the postwar face of labour was often from Southern or Eastern Europe. The image of the proletarian, in historical writing, however, remained white, descendents of the convicts and bushrangers. Rather than a *New Australia*, as in William M. Lane's utopia in Paraguay, we created migrants, *New Australians.*

2. The second dominant trope of Australian history writing, into the postwar period, was nationalist, leftwing, labourist. It fed back into the bush legend which had been invented by urban poets like Henry Lawson, who located the essence of Australia not in the land or landscape but in the rural stoicism of the labourers who worked with

nature or against it. The greatest expression of this mythology was Russell Ward's *The Australian Legend*, 1957. Ward was a smart man. He knew that the idea of the legend was ambivalent and ironic as well. But the popular version of the motif dropped out this complexity; the resulting myth indicated rather that the results of rural adversity in everyday life included an unusually cooperative ethos of mateship. Working against F. J. Turner's American frontier thesis, Ward argued that Australian adversity bred a kind of local socialism. Other peoples, on this account, may have been cooperative, but in the outback there was no choice; survival depended upon co-operation. Class might matter here, but status meant nothing. Jack was better than his master because he was smarter, more adaptable, more pragmatic. Throw him a piece of #8 wire and he could fix anything. The aristocracy was absent, elsewhere, in the London Savoy or the Ritz; the bourgeoisie was elsewhere. Here the rural proletariat ruled, and there is some degree of truth in this. One striking peculiarity of the path of development in the history of Australian settler capitalism concerns the absence of a virile, industrial modernist bourgeoisie. Labour has taken on a strong sense of presence in Australian society, until recently, and labour has been the natural constituency of the intellectuals. Up until recently you could count on one hand the number of historians who were prepared to associate with the Right which, of course, has served to reinforce the orthodoxy and complacency of the left intelligentsia itself, to the point that they have now been supplanted, not by other, competing intellectuals, but by the Prime Minister's vision itself.

Russell Ward was a communist, and he suffered for it. His work was criticized for its romanticism, a change he anticipated, and rejected: he'd read Rousseau, and he had no desire to portray the bushworkers as noble savages. Viewed sociologically, there remains something interesting in the idea that cooperation is environmentally triggered rather than biologically inherent, which resonates with more recent work such as Jonathon Turner's *Sociology of Emotions*. The more difficult aspect of the argument concerns rather its generalisability across space and time. Cooperation might be a local trait without becoming the core characteristic of national identity if, indeed, there is any such thing; and while there may well be a case for such a claim in the 1890's, there is no reason to presume it will travel

across decades of increasing complexity and mobility. In the city, alienation rules, alienation and money. More generally again, the idea that character might be connected to environment needs to be taken seriously, but detached from the older romantic and conservative privileging of place as character, where character comes from the soil rather than from cultural traffic. Plainly, place does matter, which is what led in the hands of a different, non-labour historian to the idea that Australian history was the result of the *tyranny of distance*, in Geoffrey Blainey's phrase. That sense of distance still matters, and it still helps to fuel the desire for isolation from a world nastier and dirtier and more dangerous than ours. The Twin Towers are, or were a long way from Australians, who seem to be pleased of this and their relative isolation from other people's routine troubles. The effect of the Bali bombing, in this regard, was to apparently heighten Australian fears that *el Qaeda's* primary target was us, and not the Americans. The Australian response, at least in public, has been to shoot the messengers, or at least to detain them. Perhaps Jeremy Bentham was right. The image of Australia as a prison persists.

3. A third type in the writing of Australian history is posited in 1970, in the exemplary work by Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia*. McQueen in effect reverses all that the first two tropes types signify — ideas of progress, civilizing capitalism, the egalitarian myth of labour, mateship, some kind of natural socialism generated in response to the environment, and so on. The new prospects of Australia, for McQueen, are hollow illusions — we are individualistic and self-seeking, petty-bourgeois rather than proletarian, and so is both the labour movement and the Labor party. McQueen's Marxist rejection of everything that labour culture stood for was disastrous in its timing, and expressive of a larger ultra left refusal of the Labor Party of the one moment when it needed intellectual support and direction. For the Whitlam Government, 1972-75, was the first and last opportunity to expand social democracy institutionally in Australia. An influential tandem work published in 1972, Catley and McFarlane's *From Tweedledum to Tweedledee*, argued as its title implied that the two major parties were practically identical at the very moment when the Whitlam Government was about to establish the

difference. The consequences of this ultra left dismissal of Labor were dramatic. By the time Labor returned to power in 1983, prefiguring New Labour in Britain, it had transformed its platform into economic liberalism with a welfarist gloss in social policy. The revolutionary Marxists of the 1970's reappeared among its policy ranks as career technocrats, though McQueen to his credit remained outside Canberra. The left disappeared into the Labor party, which disappeared into the state.

There was one powerful and undeniable point in McQueen's critique. The idea of a New Britannia had always been racially exclusive. The labour movement had always been a key advocate of the White Australia Policy, up until the middle sixties. The Marxist implication, that revolutionary Marxists were always internationalists, "prolier-than-thou," while reformists were always chauvinists, was less illuminating. The specific content and forms of Australian racism remained unexamined, for this was a blanket domination of all that labour stood for. Labor was cast as essentially, rather than historically, racist, and the internationalist moments of labour's record were elided, the prospect of change denied.

4. If Labor, and the labor movement were thus to be dismissed, who was left, for the left to write into history? The *fourth* type of writing Australian history, which follows on into the eighties, reflected radical trends in Australia and abroad. History was to be recast as social history, or people's history. This logic followed that of labour history, only it expanded the optic to the people, or else recast the people as the proletariat. In sociology, itself a leftwing discipline established coincidentally with the rise of the social movements of the 1960's, the emphasis shifted from Marx and Marcuse to Foucault. Structuralism was widely influential; power was widely viewed as ubiquitous and domination as unshiftable. Class, race and gender became compulsory optics, this accompanied by a generalized miserabilism about the unshiftable nature of social structures. This arguably remains the status quo among radical sociologists, who are well equipped to address domination but cannot begin to deal with change.

5. Into the 1990's, there is a shift of emphasis and focus within this frame, though the routine denunciation of class, race and gender continues. The *fifth* trope, which I think is still emerging, picks up the rational kernel of the third and fourth tropes, and identifies *race* and *ethnicity* as the most central problems of exclusion, while also in principle viewing these problems as amenable to change. Here the achievements of the social laboratory are better remembered, and placed, while their racially exclusive features are also open to foregrounding. In this more social-democratic perspective or writing of history, the recognition of genocide or forcible removal of indigenous peoples is taken as the first step and precondition of building Australia anew. To rewrite this history is also to open the way to a politics of recognition, and reconciliation. Among the most significant writers here are Henry Reynolds and, in journalism, Robert Manne. However, and here's the rub — this fresh writing of Australia has already been politically overtaken by the new political nationalism constructed by the Prime Minister, John Howard. The new writing of Australia, where the story begins with invasion and must needs return to it, has already been marginalized as weak-kneed liberalism and treachery by the new nationalism. If we Australians are keen to shoot the messengers who bring bad tidings from overseas, so are we content to turn our fear and loathing against those who remind us that we are less than perfect, that further work of writing and reform still summons us.

More generally and schematically, then, Australian history, across the twentieth century has been written as the history of British empire — a double edged trope, where the constant implication has been one of local mediocrity in comparison to, and in dependency on, the metropolitan other; and then written again as the nationalist reversal, where the local (but not the indigenous) is all things bright and beautiful. At the more directly political level, Australian achievement has been cast as the result of empire, in a unilateral flow of imperial traffic, through the reign of Liberal Prime Minister Menzies into the sixties; cultural nationalism raises its head with maverick Liberal Prime Minister Gorton, and then flourishes, briefly into the seventies with Whitlam, where the emphasis is emphatically on cultural nationalism and the consolidation of national cultural production of an identity that is more cosmopolitan. With Prime Minister Keating, in particular,

into the nineties, Australian public culture is confirmed in its republican turn; the Mabo case calls the bluff on the Lockean, British and then white or imperial Australian claim of *terra nullius* but at the same time embracing change, the accelerated change of globalization with a vengeance, casting off lines of connection with the past and opening the way unwittingly to conservative reaction and the emergence of the racist, or more accurately reactionary One Nation Party.

In embracing change with such enthusiasm, the Keating Government turned away from its traditional labour constituency. The abandonment of the old political economy of labour, including the traditional institutions of economic and social protection, left open a political space which the One Nation Party filled, adding back in another labour institution cast off in the sixties — White Australia, or at least the claim to stability or apparent safety of monoculturalism. The historical aberration of this momentarily influential, small third party became the strategic wedge that the Howard Government would use to consolidate its own dominance after 1998. Howard's strategy was to claim return to the stability or simplicity of the 1950's, offering the dream of revived suburban security in the face of heightening insecurity both globally and domestically, and to insert the appeal of One Nation into his own project, with monoculturalism, a kind of revived old Australianism, replacing the more strident anti-Asian racism of One Nation. The claim to continuity with the Australian past is, of course, limited by the Howard Government's simultaneous continuation of the global economic development strategy of Keating, and its acceleration through the extension of the new individualism, where the rhetoric of the nuclear family goes together with the extended sense of the individual as sub-contractor rather than member of a corporate or intermediate association like a class or trade union. The old utopia of liberal political theory has made a dramatic intervention here, with the image of individuals unmediated as separate members of the State, no web in between but for family or the nuclear image of family, and the institutions of civil society reconstituted as capitalist or profit-seeking throughout.

Then, the most gratuitous of historic circumstances arrive to confirm Howard as national leader, together with the complete absence of alternatives on the part of the Labor party, which in

emptying out its own traditions has become nothing more than an echo of the governing party. 9/11; and Bali; there emerges a kind of domestic state of siege, confirming the Labor opposition in its echo effect; there is, truly, no alternative. Then war; the state of siege confirmed.

And here, to repeat, is the rub: for this present government at the same moment rewrites history, reclaims the historical narrative, institutionalizing it, removing it from the academy and from the literary sense of writing; replacing the other story lines with new televisual tablets of clay which are miraculously positioned between us, in our fear and loathing, and an outside world and environment that with 9/11, and especially Bali, wants in our fantasy not only to blame but to punish us — to murder us for the follies of our global others, to punish us for our own detached and lazy good fortune.

What then is left, of these other tropes I have indicated?

- the first, the social laboratory narrative has been sunk, first of all by the Labor government of Keating
- the second, labour nationalism, has been subsumed into suburban myth of decency and ordinary populism by Howard
- the third, the radical denial of labor nationalism persists in some parts, but is morally bankrupt, one-sided, unable to acknowledge the selective achievements of white Australia
- the fourth, social history from below, survives in what is left of the academic disciplines in the academy
- the fifth, identifying the centrality of racial exclusion and the relative achievements of Australian social democracy, is holed up in the liberal press media and universities with a strong minority presence in the population.

The secret of the Howard Government in this setting, has been to interpellate fearful subjects as old Australians, to reinsert them in the imaginary of the old, safer way of life, where the continent is both distant from turmoil and dependent on our great and powerful friends, as before, and the people are unified as one race, one nation, participants in one culture. Here the Government, the *political* elite, positions and stigmatizes intellectuals and opponents as the elite. The government becomes invisible except as the natural representative of

the people. This is a masterful politics of populism, where it is less the direct problem that the people cannot represent themselves, than that there is only one possible representation.

In result, what we call Australia today might actually be two, or three nations, the first two divided between urban and rural or regional Australia, yet combined, ideologically, by the contemporary hegemony where old and new Australias are tied together. The dominant narrative is the regional ideology of the old, rural Australia reconfigured and located now in between, in the suburbs. The symbolic analysts, in Australia as in America, are footloose and mobile; it is not now only the intellectuals, but also the intellectually trained who leave, no longer for London but for technological places the world about. Surely, this will not last forever. Howard's moment is contingent, or conjunctual; it is not at all obvious that his successors will be successfully able to maintain this hegemony. It seems equally apparent, however, that there is no alternative, for Labor's leaders can imagine nothing better than outperforming Howard with the same basic model. Other narratives will persist outside these circles, other histories will be written and rewritten, but for the present and the foreseeable future the domestic political stage and the externally projected image of Australia is set in this analytically fascinating set of tensions between images of an imaginary past and a perpetually testing present.

Perhaps, in the long run, Australians no longer aspire to the status of independent Australian Britons, but to that of independent Australian Americans. The tease is in the tensions indicated here — with America as the global culture, Australian continental identity forged in the struggle with nature and against stress, and the illusion of independence suggesting isolation as much as strength, or the masculinity of virtue. An alternative approach would be to work on the sense of our accidental nature or identity, being thrown together by world history and not only by empire. As Agnes Heller insists, we find ourselves where we are by the accident of birth. Another generation will write Australia differently. Another moment will invite opening, rather than closure. Perhaps the more immediate challenge concerns not writing, but voice.

If, for the moment, political life in Australia seems frozen, the response might shift to the defense of *culture*, and it is on this issue that I close. There are still little public spheres in Australia, and universities, for all the transformations they have suffered, contribute to them. The universities remain central to critical and creative cultures, though it is also important not to limit those cultures or subsume those cultures to the institutional life of universities. Our great hope in *Thesis Eleven*, and the Thesis Eleven Centre, lies in its capacity to work on these margins, as a voluntary, parallel or auxiliary organization and a carrier of critical culture. What we need, in this context, is exactly ongoing contact with other groups, like *Budhi* in Manila. The networks work laterally, in order to grow locally. Long distance, weak ties are crucial to this project. As Bernard Smith put it in 1956 on the occasion of the Melbourne Olympics, *Australian intellectuals are migratory birds.* We work best as cultural messengers. We need to leave, in order to return — we return, as we will from the Philippines, enriched, and we hope to pass this on. Where Albert Hirschman posed three political alternatives: *exit, voice, and loyalty* — we need as antipodean intellectuals I think to live out all three modes of activity — exit (and return), voice — criticism, and postulation; loyalty, to the place to its nature and record nature, and to the peoples who inhabit it. Projects like ours depend on these networks of the edge.

Let me finish on a local note. As soon as I arrived in Manila I heard a story about a solitary figure who in the still of night can be seen planting trees on this campus at the Ateneo de Manila, in random acts of ecological kindness. To Luis David, editor of *Budhi*, I say in thanks, let us plant, let us cultivate, some of these trees together. These are not seeds or fruits that we carry, but mulch and fertilizer from us, in Melbourne, with thanks, full of respect for you and your project, hoping further to labour alongside you here and there, and here again.