

## M/C Journal, Vol. 11, No. 6 (2008) - 'recover'

### Recovering Public Memory: Politics, Aesthetics and Contempt

<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/108>

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#### 1. Guy Debord in the Land of the Long Weekend

It's the weekend – leisure time. It's the interlude when, Guy Debord contends, the proletarian is briefly free of the "total contempt so clearly built into every aspect of the organization and management of production" in commodity capitalism; when workers are temporarily "treated like grown-ups, with a great show of solicitude and politeness, in their new role as consumers." But this patronising show turns out to be another form of subjection to the diktats of "political economy": "the totality of human existence falls under the regime of the 'perfected denial of man.'" (30). As Debord suggests, even the creation of leisure time and space is predicated upon a form of contempt: the "perfected denial" of who we, as living people, really are in the eyes of those who presume the power to legislate our working practices and private identities.

This Saturday *The Weekend Australian* runs an opinion piece by Christopher Pearson, defending ABC Radio National's Stephen Crittenden, whose program *The Religion Report* has been axed. "Some of Crittenden's finest half-hours have been devoted to Islam in Australia in the wake of September 11," Pearson writes. "Again and again he's confronted a left-of-centre audience that expected multi-cultural pieties with disturbing assertions." Along the way in this admirable Crusade, Pearson notes that Crittenden has exposed "the Left's recent tendency to ally itself with Islam." According to Pearson, Crittenden has also thankfully given oxygen to claims by James Cook University's Mervyn Bendle, the "fairly conservative academic whose work sometimes appears in [these] pages," that "the discipline of critical terrorism studies has been captured by neo-Marxists of a postmodern bent" (30). Both of these points are well beyond misunderstanding or untested proposition. If Pearson means them sincerely he should be embarrassed and sacked. But of course he does not and will not be. These are deliberate lies, the confabulations of an eminent right-wing culture warrior whose job is to vilify minorities and intellectuals (Bendle escapes censure as an academic because he occasionally scribbles for the Murdoch press). It should be observed, too, how the patent absurdity of Pearson's remarks reveals the extent to which he holds the intelligence of his readers in contempt. And he is not original in peddling these toxic wares.

In their insightful—often hilarious—study of *Australian* opinion writers, *The War on Democracy*, Niall Lucy and Steve Mickler identify the left-academic-Islam nexus as the brain-child of former Treasurer-cum-memoirist Peter Costello. The germinal moment was "a speech to the Australian American Leadership Dialogue forum at the Art Gallery of NSW in 2005" concerning anti-Americanism in Australian schools. Lucy and Mickler argue that "it was only a matter of time" before a conservative politician or journalist took the plunge to link the left and terrorism, and Costello plunged brilliantly. He drew a mental map of the Great Chain of Being: left-wing academics taught teacher trainees to be anti-American; teacher trainees became teachers and taught kids to be anti-American; anti-Americanism morphs into anti-Westernism; anti-Westernism veers into terrorism (38). This is contempt for the reasoning capacity of the Australian people and, further still, contempt for any observable reality. Not for nothing was Costello generally perceived by the public as a politician whose very physiognomy radiated smugness and contempt.

Recycling Costello, Christopher Pearson's article subtly interpellates the reader as an ordinary, common-sense individual who instinctively *feels* what's right and has no need to think too much—thinking too much is the prerogative of "neo-Marxists" and postmodernists. Ultimately, Pearson's article is about channelling outrage: directing the down-to-earth passions of the Australian people against stock-in-trade culture-war hate figures. And in Pearson's paranoid world, words like "neo-Marxist" and "postmodern" are devoid of

historical or intellectual meaning. They are, as Lucy and Mickler's *War on Democracy* repeatedly demonstrate, mere ciphers packed with the baggage of contempt for independent critical thought itself.

Contempt is everywhere this weekend. *The Weekend Australian's* colour magazine runs a feature story on Malcolm Turnbull: one of those familiar profiles designed to reveal the everyday human touch of the political classes. In this puff-piece, Jennifer Hewett finds Turnbull has "a restless passion for participating in public life" (20); that beneath "the aggressive political rhetoric [...] behind the journalist turned lawyer turned banker turned politician turned would-be prime minister is a man who really enjoys that human interaction, however brief, with the many, many ordinary people he encounters" (16). Given all this energetic turning, it's a wonder that Turnbull has time for human interactions at all. The distinction here of Turnbull and "many, many ordinary people" – the anonymous masses – surely runs counter to Hewett's brief to personalise and quotidianise him. Likewise, those two key words, "however brief", have an unfortunate, unintended effect. Presumably meant to conjure a picture of Turnbull's hectic schedules and serial turnings, the words also convey the image of a patrician who begrudgingly knows one of the costs of a political career is that common flesh must be pressed—but as gingerly as possible.

Hewett proceeds to disclose that Turnbull is "no conservative cultural warrior", "onfounds stereotypes" and "hates labels" (like any baby-boomer rebel) and "has always read widely on political philosophy—his favourite is Edmund Burke". He sees the "role of the state above all as enabling people to do their best" but knows that "the main game is the economy" and is "content to play mainstream gesture politics" (19). I am genuinely puzzled by this and imagine that my intelligence is being held in contempt once again. That the man of substance is given to populist gesturing is problematic enough; but that the Burke fan believes the state is about personal empowerment is just too much. Maybe Turnbull is a fan of Burke's complex writings on the sublime and the beautiful—but no, Hewett avers, Turnbull is engaged by Burke's "political philosophy". So what is it in Burke that Turnbull finds to favour?

Turnbull's invocation of Edmund Burke is empty, gestural and contradictory. The comfortable notion that the state helps people to realise their potential is contravened by Burke's view that the state functions so "the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection... *by a power out of themselves*" (151). Nor does Burke believe that anyone of humble origins could or should rise to the top of the social heap: "The occupation of an hair-dresser, or of a working tallow-chandler, cannot be a matter of honour to any person... the state suffers oppression, if such as they, either individually or collectively, are permitted to rule" (138).

If Turnbull's main game as a would-be statesman is the economy, Burke profoundly disagrees: "the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, callico or tobacco, or some other such low concern... It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection"—a sublime entity, not an economic manager (194). Burke understands, long before Antonio Gramsci or Louis Althusser, that individuals or social fractions must be made admirably "obedient" to the state "by consent or force" (195). Burke has a verdict on mainstream gesture politics too: "When men of rank sacrifice all ideas of dignity to an ambition without a distinct object, and work with low instruments and for low ends, the whole composition [of the state] becomes low and base" (136).

Is Malcolm Turnbull so contemptuous of the public that he assumes nobody will notice the gross discrepancies between his own ideals and what Burke stands for? His invocation of Burke is, indeed, "mainstream gesture politics": on one level, "Burke" signifies nothing more than Turnbull's performance of himself as a deep thinker. In this process, the real Edmund Burke is historically erased; reduced to the status of stage-prop in the theatrical production of Turnbull's mass-mediated identity. "Edmund Burke" is re-invented as a term in an aesthetic repertoire.

This transmutation of knowledge and history into mere cipher is the staple trick of

culture-war discourse. Jennifer Hewett casts Turnbull as “no conservative culture warrior”, but he certainly shows a facility with culture-war rhetoric. And as much as Turnbull “confounds stereotypes” his verbal gesture to Edmund Burke entrenches a stereotype: at another level, the incantation “Edmund Burke” is implicitly meant to connect Turnbull with conservative tradition—in the exact way that John Howard regularly self-nominated as a “Burkean conservative”.

This appeal to tradition effectively places “the people” in a power relation. Tradition has a sublimity that is bigger than us; it precedes us and will outlast us. Consequently, for a politician to claim that tradition has fashioned him, that he is welded to it or perhaps even owns it as part of his heritage, is to glibly imply an authority greater than that of “the many, many ordinary people”—Burke’s hair-dressers and tallow-chandlers—whose company he so briefly enjoys.

In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton assesses one of Burke’s important legacies, placing him beside another eighteenth-century thinker so loved by the right—Adam Smith. *Ideology of the Aesthetic* is premised on the view that “Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body”; that the aesthetic gives form to the “primitive materialism” of human passions and organises “the whole of our sensate life together... a society’s somatic, sensational life” (13). Reading Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Eagleton discerns that society appears as “an immense machine, whose regular and harmonious movements produce a thousand agreeable effects”, like “any production of human art”. In Smith’s work, the “whole of social life is aestheticized” and people inhabit “a social order so spontaneously cohesive that its members no longer need to think about it.” In Burke, Eagleton discovers that the aesthetics of “manners” can be understood in terms of Gramscian hegemony: “in the aesthetics of social conduct, or ‘culture’ as it would later be called, the law is always with us, as the very unconscious structure of our life”, and as a result conformity to a dominant ideological order is deeply felt as pleasurable and beautiful (37, 42). When this conservative aesthetic enters the realm of politics, Eagleton contends, the “right turn, from Burke” onwards follows a dark trajectory: “forget about theoretical analysis... view society as a self-grounding organism, all of whose parts miraculously interpenetrate without conflict and require no rational justification. Think with the blood and the body. Remember that tradition is always wiser and richer than one’s own poor, pitiable ego. It is this line of descent, in one of its tributaries, which will lead to the Third Reich” (368–9).

## 2. Jean Baudrillard, the Nazis and Public Memory

In 1937, during the Spanish Civil War, the Third Reich’s Condor Legion of the Luftwaffe was on loan to Franco’s forces. On 26 April that year, the Condor Legion bombed the market-town of Guernica: the first deliberate attempt to obliterate an entire town from the air and the first experiment in what became known as “terror bombing”—the targeting of civilians. A legacy of this violence was Pablo Picasso’s monumental canvas *Guernica* – the best-known anti-war painting in art history.

When US Secretary of State Colin Powell addressed the United Nations on 5 February 2003 to make the case for war on Iraq, he stopped to face the press in the UN building’s lobby. The doorstep was globally televised, packaged as a moment of incredible significance: history in the making. It was also theatre: a moment in which history was staged as “event” and the real traces of history were carefully erased. Millions of viewers world-wide were undoubtedly unaware that the blue backdrop before which Powell stood was specifically designed to cover the full-scale tapestry copy of Picasso’s *Guernica*. This one-act, agitprop drama was a splendid example of politics as aesthetic action: a “performance” of history in the making which required the loss of actual historical memory enshrined in *Guernica*. Powell’s performance took its cues from the culture wars, which require the ceaseless erasure of history and public memory—on this occasion enacted on a breathtaking global, rather than national, scale.

Inside the UN chamber, Powell’s performance was equally staged-crafted. As he brandished vials of ersatz anthrax, the power-point behind him (the theatrical set) showed *artists’*

*impressions* of imaginary mobile chemical weapons laboratories. Powell was playing lead role in a kind of populist, hyperreal production. It was Jean Baudrillard's postmodernism, no less, as the media space in which Powell acted out the drama was not a secondary representation of reality but a reality of its own; the overheads of mobile weapons labs were simulacra, "models of a real without origins or reality", pictures referring to nothing but themselves (2). In short, Powell's performance was anchored in a "semiurgic" aesthetic; and it was a dreadful real-life enactment of Walter Benjamin's maxim that "All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war" (241).

For Benjamin, "Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure which the masses strive to eliminate." Fascism gave "these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves." In turn, this required "the introduction of aesthetics into politics", the objective of which was "the production of ritual values" (241). Under Adolf Hitler's Reich, people were able to express themselves but only via the rehearsal of officially produced ritual values: by their participation in the disquisition on what Germany meant and what it meant to be German, by the aesthetic regulation of their passions. As Frederic Spotts' fine study *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* reveals, this passionate disquisition permeated public and private life, through the artfully constructed total field of national narratives, myths, symbols and iconographies. And the ritualistic reiteration of national values in Nazi Germany hinged on two things: contempt and memory loss.

By April 1945, as Berlin fell, Hitler's contempt for the German people was at its apogee. Hitler ordered a scorched earth operation: the destruction of everything from factories to farms to food stores. The Russians would get nothing, the German people would perish. Albert Speer refused to implement the plan and remembered that "Until then... Germany and Hitler had been synonymous in my mind. But now I saw two entities opposed... A passionate love of one's country... a leader who seemed to hate his people" (Sereny 472). But Hitler's contempt for the German people was betrayed in the blustering pages of *Mein Kampf* years earlier: "The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous" (165). On the back of this belief, Hitler launched what today would be called a culture war, with its Jewish folk devils, loathsome Marxist intellectuals, incitement of popular passions, invented traditions, historical erasures and constant iteration of values.

When Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer fled Fascism, landing in the United States, their view of capitalist democracy borrowed from Benjamin and anticipated both Baudrillard and Guy Debord. In their well-known essay on "The Culture Industry", in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they applied Benjamin's insight on mass self-expression and the maintenance of property relations and ritual values to American popular culture: "All are free to dance and enjoy themselves", but the freedom to choose how to do so "proves to be the freedom to choose what is always the same", manufactured by monopoly capital (161-162). Anticipating Baudrillard, they found a society in which "only the copy appears: in the movie theatre, the photograph; on the radio, the recording" (143). And anticipating Debord's "perfected denial of man" they found a society where work and leisure were structured by the repetition-compulsion principles of capitalism: where people became consumers who appeared "s statistics on research organization charts" (123). "Culture" came to do people's thinking for them: "Pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown" (144).

In this mass-mediated environment, a culture of repetitions, simulacra, billboards and flickering screens, Adorno and Horkheimer concluded that language lost its historical anchorages: "Innumerable people use words and expressions which they have either ceased to understand or employ only because they trigger off conditioned reflexes" in precisely the same way that the illusory "free" expression of passions in Germany operated, where words were "debased by the Fascist pseudo-folk community" (166).

I know that the turf of the culture wars, the US and Australia, are not Fascist states; and I know that "the first one to mention the Nazis loses the argument". I know, too, that there are obvious shortcomings in Adorno and Horkheimer's reactions to popular culture and

these have been widely criticised. However, I would suggest that there is a great deal of value still in Frankfurt School analyses of what we might call the "authoritarian popular" which can be applied to the conservative prosecution of populist culture wars today. Think, for example, how the concept of a "pseudo folk community" might well describe the earthy, common-sense public constructed and interpellated by right-wing culture warriors: America's Joe Six-Pack, John Howard's battlers or Kevin Rudd's working families.

In fact, Adorno and Horkheimer's observations on language go to the heart of a contemporary culture war strategy. Words lose their history, becoming ciphers and "triggers" in a politicised lexicon. Later, Roland Barthes would write that this is a form of myth-making: "myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things." Barthes reasoned further that "Bourgeois ideology continuously transforms the products of history into essential types", generating a "cultural logic" and an ideological re-ordering of the world (142). Types such as "neo-Marxist", "postmodernist" and "Burkean conservative".

Surely, Benjamin's assessment that Fascism gives "the people" the occasion to express itself, but only through "values", describes the right's pernicious incitement of the mythic "dispossessed mainstream" to reclaim its voice: to shout down the noisy minorities—the gays, greenies, blacks, feminists, multiculturalists and neo-Marxist postmodernists—who've apparently been running the show. Even more telling, Benjamin's insight that the incitement to self-expression is connected to the maintenance of property relations, to economic power, is crucial to understanding the contemptuous conduct of culture wars.

### 3. Jesus Dunked in Urine from Kansas to Cronulla

American commentator Thomas Frank bases his study *What's the Matter with Kansas?* on this very point. Subtitled *How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, Frank's book is a striking analysis of the indexation of Chicago School free-market reform and the mobilisation of "explosive social issues—summoning public outrage over everything from busing to un-Christian art—which it then marries to pro-business policies"; but it is the "economic achievements" of free-market capitalism, "not the forgettable skirmishes of the never-ending culture wars" that are conservatism's "greatest monuments." Nevertheless, the culture wars are necessary as Chicago School economic thinking consigns American communities to the rust belt. The promise of "free-market miracles" fails ordinary Americans, Frank reasons, leaving them in "backlash" mode: angry, bewildered and broke. And in this context, culture wars are a convenient form of anger management: "Because some artist decides to shock the hicks by dunking Jesus in urine, the entire planet must remake itself along the lines preferred" by nationalist, populist moralism and free-market fundamentalism (5).

When John Howard received the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute's Irving Kristol Award, on 6 March 2008, he gave a speech in Washington titled "Sharing Our Common Values". The nub of the speech was Howard's revelation that he understood the index of neo-liberal economics and culture wars precisely as Thomas Frank does. Howard told the AEI audience that under his prime ministership Australia had "pursued reform and further modernisation of our economy" and that this inevitably meant "dislocation for communities". This "reform-dislocation" package needed the palliative of a culture war, with his government preaching the "consistency and reassurance" of "our nation's traditional values... pride in her history"; his government "became assertive about the intrinsic worth of our national identity. In the process we ended the seemingly endless seminar about that identity which had been in progress for some years." Howard's boast that his government ended the "seminar" on national identity insinuates an important point. "Seminar" is a culture-war cipher for intellection, just as "pride" is code for passion; so Howard's self-proclaimed achievement, in Terry Eagleton's terms, was to valorise "the blood and the body" over "theoretical analysis". This speaks stratospheric contempt: ordinary people have their identity fashioned for them; they need not think about it, only feel it deeply and passionately according to "ritual values". Undoubtedly this paved the way to Cronulla.

The rubric of Howard's speech—"Sharing Our Common Values"—was both a homage to

international neo-conservatism and a reminder that culture wars are a trans-national phenomenon. In his address, Howard said that in all his "years in politics" he had not heard a "more evocative political slogan" than Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America"—the rhetorical catch-cry for moral re-awakening that launched the culture wars. According to Lawrence Grossberg, America's culture wars were predicated on the perception that the nation was afflicted by "a crisis of our lack of passion, of not caring enough about the values we hold... a crisis of nihilism which, while not restructuring our ideological beliefs, has undermined our ability to organise effective action on their behalf"; and this "New Right" alarmism "operates in the conjuncture of economics and popular culture" and "a popular struggle by which culture can lead politics" in the passionate pursuit of ritual values (31–2). When popular culture leads politics in this way we are in the zone of the image, myth and Adorno and Horkheimer's "trigger words" that have lost their history. In this context, McKenzie Wark observes that "radical writers influenced by Marx will see the idea of culture as compensation for a fragmented and alienated life as a con. Guy Debord, perhaps the last of the great revolutionary thinkers of Europe, will call it "the spectacle" (20). Adorno and Horkheimer might well have called it "the authoritarian popular".

As Jonathan Charteris-Black's work capably demonstrates, all politicians have their own idiolect: their personally coded language, preferred narratives and myths; their own vision of who "the people" might or should be that is conjured in their words. But the language of the culture wars is different. It is not a personal idiolect. It is a shared vocabulary, a networked vernacular, a pervasive trans-national aesthetic that pivots on the fact that words like "neo-Marxist", "postmodern" and "Edmund Burke" have no historical or intellectual context or content: they exist as the ciphers of "values". And the fact that culture warriors continually mouth them is a supreme act of contempt: it robs the public of its memory. And that's why, as Lucy and Mickler's *War on Democracy* so wittily argues, if there are any postmodernists left they'll be on the right.

Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer and, later, Debord and Grossberg understood how the political activation of the popular constitutes a hegemonic project. The result is nothing short of persuading "the people" to collaborate in its own oppression. The activation of the popular is perfectly geared to an age where the main stage of political life is the mainstream media; an age in which, Charteris-Black notes, political classes assume the general antipathy of publics to social change and act on the principle that the most effective political messages are sold to "the people" by an appeal "to familiar experiences"—market populism (10). In her substantial study *The Persuaders*, Sally Young cites an Australian Labor Party survey, conducted by pollster Rod Cameron in the late 1970s, in which the party's message machine was finely tuned to this populist position. The survey also dripped with contempt for ordinary people: their "Interest in political philosophy... is very low... They are essentially the products (and supporters) of mass market commercialism". Young observes that this view of "the people" was the foundation of a new order of political advertising and the conduct of politics on the mass-media stage. Cameron's profile of "ordinary people" went on to assert that they are fatally attracted to "a moderate leader who is strong... but can understand and represent their value system" (47): a prescription for populist discourse which begs the question of whether the values a politician or party represent via the media are ever really those of "the people". More likely, people are hegemonised into a value system which they take to be theirs. Writing of the media side of the equation, David Salter raises the point that when media "moguls thunder about 'the public interest' what they really mean is 'what we think the public is interested in'", which is quite another matter.. Why this self-serving deception is still so sheepishly accepted by the same public it is so often used to violate remains a mystery" (40).

Sally Young's *Persuaders* retails a story that she sees as "symbolic" of the new world of mass-mediated political life. The story concerns Mark Latham and his "revolutionary" journeys to regional Australia to meet the people. "When a political leader who holds a public meeting is dubbed a 'revolutionary'", Young rightly observes, "something has gone seriously wrong". She notes how Latham's "use of old-fashioned 'meet-and-greet' campaigning methods was seen as a breath of fresh air because it was unlike the type of packaged, stage-managed and media-dependent politics that have become the

norm in Australia." Except that it wasn't. "A media pack of thirty journalists trailed Latham in a bus", meaning, that he was not meeting the people at all (6-7). He was traducing the people as participants in a media spectacle, as his "meet and greet" was designed to fill the image-banks of print and electronic media. Even meeting the people becomes a media pseudo-event in which the people impersonate the people for the camera's benefit; a spectacle as artfully deceitful as Colin Powell's UN performance on Iraq.

If the success of this kind of "self-serving deception" is a mystery to David Salter, it would not be so to the Frankfurt School. For them, an understanding of the processes of mass-mediated politics sits somewhere near the core of their analysis of the culture industries in the "democratic" world. I think the Frankfurt school should be restored to a more important role in the project of cultural studies. Apart from an aversion to jazz and other supposedly "elitist" heresies, thinkers like Adorno, Benjamin, Horkheimer and their progeny Debord have a functional claim to provide the theory for us to expose the machinations of the politics of contempt and its aesthetic ruses.

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