

Customs and Change: A Study of Modernity and Postmodernism

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This article uses the site of Customs House in Sydney to examine how the interaction of modernity and postmodernism can be used to enhance our understanding of both history and the present. It traces the history of Customs House since its construction in 1845 through to the present day, illustrating how modernity has been and is a powerful force behind Australia's socio-economic development, and how modernity influences the way in which we approach our history. The paper asserts that this approach provides an incomplete understanding of history and reality, as it is inclined to overlook those groups who did not benefit from modernist thinking to maintain the impression of progress being universally positive. The article then argues that it is necessary to undertake a postmodern questioning of a modernist view of history and reality, in order to better understand them. It approaches the history of Customs House, and Australia, through the perspectives of three marginalised groups; Aboriginal Australians, Asian migrants, and women. This shows how postmodern thinking must often be coupled with a modernist approach in order to explain past events and present realities. It argues that postmodernism is in fact borne of modernity, in that it is an example of intellectual progress, and progress lies at the heart of modernity. The article then asserts that an understanding of the past is essential to our knowledge of the present, and that by questioning each other, modernity and postmodernism increase our comprehension of history and reality.

Modernity and postmodernism are often considered to be conflicting concepts which, through contradicting each other, weaken an overall understanding of our reality. I believe that by challenging a modernist interpretation of history and contemporary society, postmodernism enhances our understanding of both past and present. In order to portray this relationship more clearly I have chosen the Sydney Customs House as my starting point, as I feel that its historical and current associations reflect a strong interplay of modernity and postmodernism.

For the purposes of this article, *Modernity* relates to the advocating of reason, Enlightenment and a "belief in the necessity of social progress" (Gillen & Ghosh, 2006, p.33); *Postmodernism* is a widespread reaction modernity rejecting universal and historical truths, grand narratives and progress; and the *Present Moment* pertains to the apparent realities of contemporary Australian and Western society.

This article critically traces the ways in which modernity and postmodernism interrelate to enhance our understanding of the present moment, and especially of contemporary Australia. Firstly I will trace Australia's progress as reflected in Customs House; from a British colony, to a federated nation, and finally to a developed country with its own culture and history. This will highlight how both contemporary and historically

contextual perspectives have represented modernity and progress as positive forces. I will then discuss how certain historical viewpoints have emerged in recent years with regard to Customs House; namely the perspectives of indigenous Australians, Asian migrants and women. These perspectives challenge the long-held view of Customs House as a symbol of positive progress, and indeed the whole idea of modernity as a beneficial force. They also represent an increasing tendency in the Western world to reject dominant versions of history and reality, in favour of plural realities and historical truths. Finally I will answer the question: how can postmodern questioning of a modernist approach to our past and present lead to a greater comprehension of the present moment, or in this case, of contemporary Australia?

The Working Man's Paradise

The early history of Customs House reflects Australia's socio-economic development in the late 19th Century, as well as the modernist view taken by most Australians regarding this phenomenon. The building was initially constructed in 1845 to cope with the increasing levels of imports and migration which the country was experiencing. The business of customs house reflected not only the rate of Australia's socio-economic growth, but also the nature of its development. Convict transportation was phased out between 1840 and 1868; whilst the discovery of gold in Bathurst, Victoria, in 1851 led to a vast increase in migration from Britain, Europe and North America. This meant that rather than dealing with the forced transportation of criminals, Customs House was now overseeing the voluntary migration of free, skilled workers. This demographic alteration considerably affected Australia's early economic and urban growth. By the 1880's, Australia possessed a thriving agricultural sector, accompanied by rapidly-growing cities – for a short time Melbourne was the second-largest city in the British Empire. This development manifested itself physically at Customs House, which was expanded in 1885 to cope with the nation's seemingly endless progress.

Little thought was given to those excluded from this wave of modernity: the dispossession of the indigenous Australians was easily overlooked by a modernist-minded colonial population; whilst the blatant exclusion of women and Asian migrants was quickly excused by the need to protect the economic interests of male, white Australians. Indeed, it was the responsibility of Customs House to decide if an Asian person could enter the country, and also where they were allowed to live and work. Quite paradoxically, Customs House waved through masses of British and European migrants as Australia quickly gained a reputation as a 'working man's paradise', due largely to the rights and freedoms available to White Australians. The growing numbers of skilled workers and craftsmen led to the formation of trade unions in professions such as mining, shearing and stonemasonry. These groups lobbied very successfully for workers rights unheard of elsewhere in the world – in 1856 the Stonemasons union became the first labour group in the world, to win an eight-hour day. This affinity with Enlightenment humanism continued into Australian politics, where this highly-paid, skilled working class argued for democratic institutions such as a free press and representative government. There was also an increasing nationalist push for federation, exacerbated by the economic depression of the 1890s, which threw the inefficiencies of the six-colony

system into sharp relief. Almost anachronistically, Customs House remained a powerful link to Britain, “A solitary symbol of British power over sea and trade,” (Customs House Management team, 2004, p.2) and the venue through which all economic contact with the Empire was processed. Thus Customs House provides a two-fold reflection of modernity in Australia in this period. It shows the practical idealization of progress as manifested in Australia’s booming economy, including a willingness to overlook those disadvantaged by change in favour of wider modernization. It also demonstrates how Enlightenment ideals such as humanism, liberalism and nationalism became an integral part of Australian attitudes to politics and personal freedoms.

The Birth of a Nation

Australia’s political progress took what was arguably its greatest step in 1901, when the six separate colonies became one federated nation. A new sense of unity and national identity was symbolically reflected in Customs House. The site held an official celebration of Federation on January 1st, 1901, and the department of Trade and Customs was the first department established under the new Australian government. Indeed, the introduction of a standardised tariff for all the colonies had been a significant force behind the Federation, as “This stopped fierce border disputes between the colonies,” and “High duties on imports protected national industries and provided government revenue.” (Customs House Management team, 2004, p.6) Customs House became a symbol not of British colonial might, but of Australia’s social, political and economic development. As the new nation’s economy boomed in the early 20th century, the ranks of Customs House swelled as more workers were brought in to handle ever-increasing exports, especially from the agricultural sector. However, the underlying weaknesses of Australia’s apparent agricultural might were brutally highlighted by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Not only were the country’s wheat and wool industries crippled by the rapid drop in overseas demand, but the once-powerful Labor party was split into factions by their failure to deal with the accompanying social struggles. The halls of Customs House, though they continued to operate, grew increasingly quiet as the Depression worsened. It was the first time in the new nation’s history that the cost of rapid economic progress was felt by the White population.

Customs House is also an actual and symbolic representation of the development of Australian culture after Federation. The building was responsible for quarantine and contraband items, and practically enforced policies about what was and was not allowed into Australia. Customs workers thus helped to facilitate the continued monopoly of a White, Christian-influenced demographic over Australia’s cultural fabric, by banning items such as ‘indecent’ books and contraceptive devices (Customs House Management team, 2004, p.6) Change and modernization were wonderful, as long as they were the changes approved by the dominant socio-political group. Customs House further reinforced this hegemony by enforcing the White Australia policy from 1901 to the 1970s, minimising the Asian migration which many people feared “...would endanger living standards and create unemployment”. (Dixon, 1945) Once again, so-called modernists advocated progress – but only the right kind of progress, for the right kind of people. Perhaps the most progressive move in Australia’s political history was the

abolition of the White Australia policy by the Whitlam government in 1973 – a step which demonstrated ‘true’ social egalitarianism, and therefore ‘true’ Enlightenment values. Meanwhile the practical business of Customs House grew exponentially after the Second World War, with modern inventions such as typewriters and computers being introduced as technology developed. Finally in 1990 the business of customs was relocated to a site nearer the airport. This very relocation reflects technological progress, as air travel overtook sea travel in the latter 20th Century. Thus the site again reflects both the economic modernisation of Australia, and the way in which accompanying modernist ideals manifested themselves in society.

The New Progress

Over the past two decades, Customs House has undergone yet another change, which once again reflects similar shifts in Australia’s socio-economic values. In 1994 the City of Sydney leased Customs House from the Commonwealth, and modernised the venue to suit cafes and cultural facilities (Customs House Management team, 2004, p.5). This move towards commercialism mirrors an increasing economic trend towards that very force in Australia, and the increasing commercialisation of the developed world. Whilst the agricultural and industrial sectors are still vital, economic progress is now equally measured by the growth of commercial businesses and commodities. This arguably reflects the essence of modernity wherein that which was once considered progressive – in this case, a booming agricultural sector – is overshadowed by newer values, products and ideas.

This site also continues to highlight changes, or modernity, in Australia’s socio-cultural attitudes. In 2004 the building was reconfigured again to house the City of Sydney Library, and also hosts other cultural exhibitions and events. Although this may be regarded solely as homage to tradition, it is also a testament to cultural progress. Many of the exhibitions held at Customs House have indigenous or multicultural influences, reflecting the increasing cultural tolerance that has grown in Australia since the 1970s. Furthermore, the site’s attempts to preserve Australia’s history and traditions are in themselves evidence of our development – a hundred years ago, we would not have had anything to preserve. In a current setting modernity may be seen as a more positive force, smoothing over the fractures in our glowingly progressive history, and encouraging economic and cultural diversity in contemporary society.

The Beginning of the End

Customs House reflects great historical and cultural depth, and thus is an ideal frame through which to view the interaction of modernity with postmodernism. In recent decades, postmodernism has fostered an increased questioning of Western modernist ideas and histories, particularly by once-marginalised groups. According to Kuan-Hsing Chen:

Postmodernity denotes excursion into post-history in the sense that *that specific* Western monolithic thing called History is over and done

with ...what is finished is the official, universal, unified, racist, sexist, imperialist History...(1991, p.37-38)

Similarly in Australia, the past fifty years has seen the emergence of various perspectives which challenge a largely positive modernist interpretation of Australian history. One such perspective is that of indigenous Australians, and their challenge to the accepted national history can be clearly seen through this site.

The land on which Customs House is built traditionally belongs to the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, who are the custodians of most of inner Sydney. For thousands of years before colonisation, the Gadigal clan traded, hunted and fished in the area around Customs House. The specific location of the building is the site on which Captain Arthur Phillip raised the first British flag in 1788, and so there has been much conflict over its significance. For the white colonials, this spot marks the beginning of Australia's history and impressive progress; but for Aboriginal Australians, it symbolises the beginning of the end of Aboriginal culture. Customs House continued to be one of many symbols of indigenous degradation from its construction in 1845 up until the 1990s. Even as it reflected progress and prosperity for white Australia, it represented the decimation of the Aboriginal way of life as the country became increasingly Westernised. The farms which fed Australia's thriving agricultural sector were built on lands forcibly taken from the Aboriginal people. Whilst white Australians undoubtedly suffered in the Great Depression, it was indigenous workers who were often first to lose their jobs. The cost of economic progress in Australia was higher for the Aboriginal people than for any other group.

Indigenous Australians also suffered through Australia's cultural development – or rather a lack thereof, as the dominant socio-political forces strove to create a supposedly superior 'White Australia'. Whilst Customs House was not responsible for enforcing those policies pertaining to Aboriginal Australians, such as the forced Assimilation policy and the subsequent Stolen Generation, it was certainly a symbol of white Australia's determination to foster an Anglo-only society. The first significant step towards Aboriginal rights was the 1967 Referendum, which passed with an overwhelming 90% which, amongst other things, gave Aboriginal people the right to vote. Other important developments were the Mabo Decision of 1992, which overturned the concept of *terra nullius* and acknowledged Aboriginal land ownership; and the institution of National Sorry Day in 1998. These changes reflect an increasing awareness of the Aboriginal perspective, and the acknowledgement of the suffering which indigenous Australians endured as a result of colonisation and ensuing progress. This recognition has a physical manifestation at Customs House, where an Aboriginal flag now flies alongside the Australian flag. Many of the artistic and cultural installations exhibited at the site also have indigenous origins. Even so, many indigenous Australians continue to live as disenfranchised, second-class citizens. The Aboriginal perspective thoroughly undermines those viewpoints which depict Australia's socio-economic progress as a positive force, and ultimately challenges the notion of modernity and progress as being wholly beneficial forces. Nevertheless, it is only through developments – or 'progress' – in Western thinking that post-colonial voices such as these have been allowed to appear, and contradict once-dominant views of the world.

The Yellow Peril

Another perspective which disagrees with a uniformly positive view of modernity in Australia is that of Asian migrants. This diverse group was generally restricted or excluded from migrating to Australia from the mid-19th Century until 1973. These restrictions began in the 1850s, when the Gold Rush saw a wave of Chinese migrants arrive in Australia. Customs House was empowered to decide where Chinese migrants could live and work, so that they did not interfere with the efforts of white prospectors. During the 1880s, Chinese migrants and “Kanakas” (Pacific Islanders) were often brought in by wealthy farmers as cheap labour on Queensland sugar plantations. Protests from various trade unions led to even tighter restrictions on Asian migration, and sowed the seeds of the White Australia policy.

The policy itself came into action with the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, and was enforced by Customs House. Customs workers would give Asian migrants a dictation test in an unfamiliar language, and anyone who failed the exam (which was almost everyone) would be refused entry to Australia. The Australian government was determined that the ‘working man’s paradise’ would remain so only for European migrants. Anti-Asian sentiment was exacerbated by the Second World War, when fears of Australia being overrun by Japan led to slogans such as “Populate or perish”. Although the policy was relaxed by degrees between 1947 and 1966, Customs House continued to enforce the White Australia policy until 1973, when the Whitlam Labor government enacted amendments making it illegal to regard race as a factor when choosing migrants or granting citizenship. This landmark legislation was reinforced by the Racial Discrimination Act of 1975, which forbade discrimination on the basis of race in any official circumstances. The workers of Customs House were no longer obliged, or allowed to institute the anti-Asian immigration laws which had existed for more than a century. Today approximately 8% of the population is of Asian descent, compared to 37% who claim Anglo-Australian origins (2006 Census, ABS) The newly-realised perspective of Asian migrants illustrates another negative aspect of modernity; that its benefits are not necessarily universal, and those excluded from the wave of progress often suffer as a result of it. Yet again, however, it is progress and change in Western thinking, as evidenced by postmodernism that has facilitated the realisation of those voices which challenge the very notion of positive progressivism.

A Woman’s Work

The final perspective which this article examines is that of Australian working women. This was another group which was largely excluded from the benefits of Australia’s seemingly constant modernization and development. Australia was considered the ‘working man’s paradise’, but Australian women did not enter the public workforce until the latter nineteenth century. Until then they could partake in the country’s rapid economic progress only vicariously through their male relatives; they had no capacity to benefit from, or contribute to such advancement in their own right. Customs House was no exception; women were forbidden to work there until 1872, when Edith Hanson

became the building's first woman typist. "Clerical occupations quickly became among the most gender-segregated of all jobs: numerically dominated by women and discursively marked as 'women's work'." (Boyer & England, 2009, p.307) This is clear evidence of the ways in which " 'women's skills have been historically undervalued, ignored altogether, or judged to be of less importance than those of men.'" (Saunders & Evans, 1994, cited in Nugent, 2002, p.3) Economic and social progress was the province of male Australians; women could benefit from modernization, but not actively participate in it.

By 1908 women in all six states were allowed to vote in Federal elections, but the attitudes towards women in the workforce, and at Customs House, did not change. In 1929 Mary Hughes was rejected when she applied for a Customs agent's license, after "the Comptroller-General told her "the wharves are no place for a lady"." (Customs House Management team, 2004, p.9) White male Australia retained its dominance – women could be granted progressive social freedoms, such as enfranchisement, but could not achieve economic autonomy equal to that of their male counterparts. Not until 1967 were women allowed to work as Customs officers; in that year, four women were appointed as preventative officers to seek out female smugglers (Customs House Management team, 2004, p.9). This coincided with the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which saw women throughout the Western world gaining social independence and economic freedoms. Nevertheless, women continued to be paid lower wages than men in many areas – a trend which still exists in some employment sectors even today. The perspective of women on Australian history further undermines the idea of universally positive progress which sits at the heart of modernity. It shows how that very modernisation fostered a white, male-dominated society, which denied women economic freedom and relegated them to dependent second-class citizens. Even so, it is once again the modernisation, or perhaps post-modernisation of Western thinking which has enabled women to achieve relative independence, and voice the perspectives which challenge the accepted version of history and our understanding of contemporary Australia.

The interplay of modernity and postmodernism at this site clearly reflects how these concepts may interact with regard to historical and contemporary Australia. A modernist approach to the history of Customs House is a vehicle for reflecting important socio-economic progressions in Australia's history. It demonstrates how modernity clearly influenced the attitudes of the contextually dominant social group (i.e. white male Australians). It also illustrates the ways in which a modernist approach to our country's history enables one to overlook discriminatory actions or disadvantaged groups, in light of the enormous social and economic progress which Australia has made in the past two centuries. However, through a postmodern questioning of a pro-progress, modernist approach, we can see how this perspective fails to account for the experiences of certain subordinate groups. It also does not explain the emergence of women, Asian migrants and indigenous Australians as fairly recent socio-economic forces, whose alternative perspectives and experiences have only lately been given voice. A modernist approach may have suggested that these groups were merely swept along in the wave of progress, or were the necessary sacrifices made for the sake of modernisation. This does not account for the lower wages paid to women even today; for the comparatively small

percentage of our population which is Asian; or for the continued poverty and disenfranchisement of many indigenous Australians. It becomes clear that a solely modernist viewing creates an incomplete picture of both history and the present. It is only by examining this site, and Australia's history, through the eyes of the aforementioned disadvantaged groups that we can gain a fuller understanding of Australia's socio-economic development, and therefore of its present socio-economic condition.

We must fully understand the past in order to better comprehend the present. As Hobsawm states, "...where we stand in regard to the past, what the relations are between past, present and future are not only matters of vital interest to all: they are quite indispensable." (1998, p.32) We cannot understand either of these using only modernity or postmodernism; modernity neglects certain viewpoints in order to justify continuous progress, whilst postmodernism could not exist without modernity. Indeed, as I have reiterated, postmodernism may be considered a form of intellectual progress, and progress is the cornerstone of modernist thinking. "We have not entered a "post-modern society... we have entered the second phase of modernity." (Muckenburger, Stroh & Zoll, 1995, p.16) Modernity has given rise to the very school of thought which challenges it most. The two concepts are so inextricably linked that they are forced to interact, both at this site and in wider Australian society. It is only by using these two ideas to challenge and question each other, and our existing notions of history and reality, that we can fully understand the present moment that we live in.

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