

Hyde Park Barracks

Amy Rathbone

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney

Hyde Park Barracks has served as convict housing, a home to free immigrants, destitute women and orphans and as an administrative hub. Now it realises Australian nationalism as a museum about all of these things. This paper aims to demonstrate that the site, during all of its uses, has been infested by the ideas of modernity and postmodernity. It suggests that to understand the site, one must acknowledge both the forces of colonialism, imperialism, Marxism and capitalism from which it grew and the notions about Australian identity and nationality that it has inspired. The paper makes note that this shifting use of space had not been without the class relations and inequalities identified in Marxist philosophy. The paper then problematizes the identity spawned by the Barracks and questions whether 'Australia' really exists. Drawing the argument together, it reveals history as a collision of unstable ideas cloaked in ambiguity.

Hyde Park Barracks sprang to life in the winter of 1819 as Australia's first permanent lodgings for its convict population. Designed by convict architect to Governor Lachlan Macquarie, Francis Greenway, the brickwork building epitomised the Governor's desire to coerce the penal colony into a burgeoning new society. Come the end of transportation in 1848, fifty thousand convicts had slept in the Barracks' tightly packed hammocks and marched out the western gates each morning, forming Sydney's backbone as working gangs. Although no longer an emblem of surveillance and hard 'yakka', the mid 19th century saw the Barracks continued use by new arrivals to the Colony. For forty years, the Barracks played home to orphans driven from Ireland by the Great Famine and free immigrant women afforded passage as Sydney's future servants and wives. In 1862, those left behind by the waves of progression-the elderly, destitute and infirm-joined them as tenants of "Hyde Park Asylum." Convict irons and rosaries were then replaced with chains of empire and arbitration, as the Barracks were transformed to host judges, clerks and accountants.

Although beset by tumultuous 21st Century city life, Hyde Park Barracks stands steadfast on Macquarie Street. The three-storey brick structure has been restored to the glory of its convict years. Nowadays, the building welcomes passers-by and tourists with open gates, promising to share a rich and dark history as a museum of itself. However, behind this handsome façade lies not simply a museum, but a series of fluid and forceful ideas. This article attempts to decipher Hyde Park Barracks as an index of two centuries of changing values. It will explore the birth of the site through the imperialist practice of colonialism before questioning how the Barracks, particularly as a tourism endeavour, reflects Marxist and capitalist discourses. The article will then discern how the site constructs Australian identity through a postmodernist lens, leading into a broader discussion of nationalism and conceptions of the 'nation.' As a result, the article will problematise conceptions of modernity and postmodernity as diametric opposites, instead arguing that the two bodies of ideas are cloaked by ambiguity in light of their constant transformation. In doing so, the article will delve into the present moment as haunted by ideas of the modern and postmodern. It will uncover the shifting use of space as a wider reflection of changing values of a time gone by.

The early architecture of Australia is the most tangible and evocative record of the foundation of this country and the development of our unique traditions. Historic buildings have a special quality that adds up to

much more than the sum of all the architectural parts. They have a certain aura, which comes from their association with things long past, with people and events which came in the early history of our country, and which, each in its own way, helped to shape the environment and the spirit of Australia today (State Planning Authority of NSW 1965, p.3).

Underpinned by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, modernism—the idea of progress, of technological, scientific and social innovation and society’s strive for a utopian end—has dominated Western thinking from the beginning of the 19th Century. Historian Sidney Pollard argues that modernists consider life as consisting “of irreversible changes in one direction only, and that this direction is towards improvement” (Wright 2004, p.3). For Paul Gillen and Devleena Ghosh (2007, p.33), modernism caused societies’ fascination with organising their own self-improvement, from which sprung colonialism.

The Barracks were forced into being by necessity, as a surging crime wave had led to a shortage of space in already overcrowded jails and prison hulks in England (Shaw 1966, p.3). Transportation seemed appropriate as both a severe punishment and solution. But the site, essentially a pawn in the British Empire’s imperial plans, had colonialism as its driver. As an emblem of Australia’s settlement, the Barracks evoke Europe’s “hazardous romance of exploration and conquest” (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p.12). The construction of the Barracks allowed confinement of the convict population but, more importantly, control of their skills and trades. The Barracks’ convicts were put to work on Governor Macquarie’s ambitious building program. Through the construction of thoroughfares, a dockyard, four military barracks, a new church and a jail among others, historians Alan George Lewers Shaw and Nicolson (1966, p.15) argue the convicts changed Sydney “almost out of recognition.” They had cemented Britain as a realm of power by establishing Sydney as something to boast about. The European settlement of Australia had many motives—wealth, pride in imperial glory, escape from poverty and persecution—most of which are innately colonial (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, 19). Hyde Park Barracks, then, expresses expansionist logics and a dogmatic, immovable belief in progress, and has at its heart the ideas of modernity.

A modernist viewpoint assumes that the past is primitive in comparison to our current progressed state. If modernism favours constant progress, why then does Marxism—essentially an analysis of the past—fall under this umbrella term? Dr Bill Dunn (2009, p.1) argues that central to Marxism “is a claim that capitalism creates a collectively exploited working class in a unique position to transform itself & the world.” Marxism befits the category of modernity because, although it focuses on history—deciphering it as essentially “the history of class struggles” (Marx & Engels 1848 p.1)—such analyses is not conducted without the aim of improving the future. Moreover, commodities and the means of exchange rapidly developed and so empowered the bourgeoisie, as a result of expanding markets in the colonies.

“I did not realise that it [Hyde Park Barracks] not only represents a chapter in Australian history but probably a picture of the whole of our Australian industrial development” George Weir, Minister for Conservation in 1941 (Hyde Park Barracks Museum display)

The history of Hyde Park Barracks is bound up in Marxist ideas. The dichotomy between convict and settler—the splitting of society into “two great hostile camps” (Marx & Engels 1848, p.1)—is central to an understanding of the site’s use as convict housing. The settler class was to the bourgeoisie as convicts were to the proletariat: the oppressor and the oppressed. This theme continued into the use of the Barracks as accommodation for orphan girls and destitute, infirm women. The site remained disassociated with property ownership

and the means of production and, as such, grew as a symbol of the bottom of the social order. This association with the proletariat was reversed in 1887 when the Barracks became the workplace for bourgeois judges, court administrators and accountants. According to Marxist philosophers Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (1848, p.2), accompanying each development in modern industry was “a corresponding political advance.” Australian modern industry had expanded, and so the reigns of the bourgeoisie through increased white-collar work. Such work, as Dunn argues, allowed more value to be “squeezed” out of labour (2009, p.9). Nowadays, Hyde Park Barracks’ relationship with Marxist philosophy is at a state of equilibrium. The museum recognises the “antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes” (Marx & Engels 1884, p.5) it played host to, and its contribution to the Barracks, Sydney and wider Australia in the present day.

The idea of material and monetary progress has become assertive in the last 300 years. According to author Ronald Wright (2004, p.4), it coincided with the rise of industry and science and has been ensued by a proportional moral decline. Capitalism, an economic system of private ownership and profiteering characteristic of the West, is perhaps most recognisable in such a notion. Social scientist Werner Sombart used the term “Komfortismus” to describe the capitalist’s “[craze] for money.” Ian Buruma and Avishai Margali (2004, p.53) accede that, “to be comfortable... the West need to make money.”

The birth of the highly integrated and developed global society has increased trade and investment, so advancing capitalism. This has been mirrored by a rise in mass consumerism and the commerce culture (Elliott 2008, p.118) observable in the Barracks. The capitalist idea is eminent in the contemporary use of Hyde Park Barracks as a museum. More than a display of historicity, the site manipulates tourism and ‘nationalism,’ which are in essence great economic drivers. Entry is charged at ten dollars per adult and five per child. The south-western most room on the first floor has been converted into a shop and sells memorabilia for profit. In actuality, the individuals and organisations behind the Barracks are banking on Australians’ interest in knowing their roots and the dedication of travellers to their vocation of discovering Australia. Professor Anthony Elliott (2008, p.119) argues that globalised, capitalist society gave impetus to a movement away from manufacture to service and communications sectors. A museum is a multimodal form of communicating history using new information technology and thus embedded in capitalism and its codes.

But why does the layman need to understand these multifaceted, unstable ideas of the moderns? Neo-colonialism suggests that the colonial relations of domination continue despite Australia having progressed for 200 years. It is worth questioning whether the economic inequality that pervades the site as a capitalist endeavour reproduces the same inequality between the bourgeoisie and proletariat in the site’s convict days. German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote:

Perhaps a revolution can overthrow autocratic despotism and profiteering or power-grabbing oppression, but it can never truly reform a manner of thinking; instead, new prejudices, just like the old ones they replace, will serve as a leash for the great unthinking mass (1784, p.1).

Although the dynamics and means of Australia’s ruling class may have changed between now and 1819, Hyde Park Barracks remain at the mercy of the people and global ideas in charge. Even the museum display signals modernist tendencies. The panels describing the exhibition adopt a tone of omniscience and leave little room for personal interpretation. Labelled “Changing attitudes,” one panel states: “Hyde Park Barracks became a symbol for emancipists to remove the convict stain from Sydney in 1848,” and, “These relics and ruins,

once neglected, have become major attractions.” Without primary evidence to allow individual judgements, both statements read as indisputable truth. Entrusted to the Historic Houses Trust, an authority within the New South Wales Government’s Office of Environment and Heritage, the Barracks is in the province of the ruling class. As Marx and Engels (1848,p.9) argue, it is from this class that the ruling ideas of the ages stem. It is thus beneficial to the layman to acknowledge the influence of ideas, undo historical structures and so understand the inefficiencies of history and how they themselves are positioned to receive a site. To understand the inner workings of imperialism, colonialism, Marxism and capitalism allows us, to some extent, to stabilise conceptions of the world around us.

“Postmodern does not signify recent. It signifies how writing... is situated after it has succumbed to the contagion of modernity and has tried to cure itself of it...Lay modernity maintains this temporal device, that of a ‘great narrative,’ which promises at the end to reconcile the subject with itself and the overcoming of its separation... [The postmodern story leaves] thought suffering for lack of finality” Jean-François Lyotard (1997, pp.98-99).

The quote by Lyotard, patriarch to postmodernism, espouses postmodernism’s nature. Rather than a distinct group of ideas that took modernity’s place, postmodernism feeds parasitically on and matures from its ‘precursor.’ For postmodernists, the “grand narratives” of the moderns are no more than social constructs: negotiated meanings that far from expressing the “truth” merely capture a particular way of thinking. Although postmodernism had not begun as an Australian intellectual culture in the late 19th Century, it soon spread its dominion to our shores. Postmodernist theory as a realisation of all meaning as relative and unstable is deeply embedded in the Australian psyche. This article aims to construct and then reconstruct conceptions of Hyde Park Barracks by questioning and problematising the ideas of the modern and postmodern. Itself engages in a postmodernist enterprise to derail notions of the site as untouched by the forces of history. As Lyotard (1984, p.15) surmises “...no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before.”

Initially a symbol for emancipists to remove the “stain” of our convict heritage, this attitude towards the Barracks-and our cultural identity-lifted in the 1970s. Australians realised that contemporary society had spawned from the convict’s early industries and agricultural practices, as well as the fact that one in ten Australians had a convict ancestor. Nowadays, Hyde Park Barracks is synonymous with Australia’s convict heritage and, in the present day, our identity as the urban people of a cosmopolitan city (McAllister 2006, p.12). However, as Nicholas Thomas (1994, p.182) argues, “at any time a plethora of narratives of national identity are circulating,” and it is “unwise for any one to claim emblematic status.” The notion that Hyde Park Barracks, without question, realises this cultural identity is erroneous. According to Bouma (1992), Australian culture has been exalted to a status as multicultural and has adopted an array of different cultures. The identity the Barracks signal maligns free immigrants and ignores multiculturalism. It disregards Australian Aborigines, much owing to Merivale’s (1861, p.490) notion that European settlements led to “a wide and sweeping destruction of native races.” Such races were physically destroyed, but also mentally and socially disregarded. Resultantly, national identity is limited as it meets “some checklist of what is or is not politically correct” (Thomas 1994, p.172).

Identity is not static but a social construct, inextricable from the constructionist’s upbringing, ideology and social standing. A plurality of voices and identities compete for primacy in Hyde Park Barracks, contradictory to the modernist telling of a fixed linear historical

narrative. However, the authorities behind Hyde Park Barracks position us to accept the site as an emblem of our convict history and our present day urbanity. Those in charge create the most widely held identities. Still, it is wrong to say that no other identity is gleaned from the site. Identity is an idea—largely postmodernist-made sense of by highly elaborated codes that lead to a different outcome for different individuals depending on their circumstances. Thomas (1994, p.188) states: “Discourses of this kind must be understood as ambiguous and historically mutable instruments, as projects that possess one value at one time and another subsequently.” As postmodernism and modernism are condemned to fluidity, so is identity ahistorical construction that adapts according to new emotional, psychological and political contexts.

The transformation of Hyde Park Barracks into a museum between 1979 and 1984 identified a new vitality in the *idea* of Australia. Although museums had been established from the 1820s, they had advocated a Eurocentric view that “Australia, a fledgling among the nations of the world, had no history that was worthy of preservation, display or commemoration” (Lumley 1988, p.79). As Robert Lumley continues, the first museum regarded as a national institution was the Australian War Memorial, which dabbled into the heroism of soldiers—“the theatres of ‘real history.’” The transformation of the Barracks into a museum made it the first institution to realise the lives of ordinary people and distinguish them as Australian. The heritage policy of the Whitlam years took an interest in compiling a register of protected properties related to Australia’s past and, as a result, nationalised that past. As interpreted by Lumley (1988, p.77), both movements meant that Hyde Park Barracks came to materialise a strong “sense of a national people with an autonomous history.” Indeed, the site, as it stands, manifests the development of Australia as a nation. While reality is out there, postmodernism contends that our ways of knowing it are contestable. But could we go as far to state that the idea of the nation does not exist? White, author of “Inventing Australia,” argues:

‘Australia’ exists pre-eminently as an idea. While it has a real existence as a geographical space with defined boundaries and as a political entity... ‘Australia’ for the most part is something we carry around in our heads (Hudson & Bolton 1997, p.13).

Hyde Park Barracks relates several implications for an imagined Australian nationality. Firstly, our history is one of colonisation; we have all come to Australia from somewhere else. And, while we may call ourselves ‘Australian,’ underlying our nationality is ambivalence about our hybrid heritages (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p.14). Secondly, the word nation denotes the idea of a *community*, and yet, as Anderson (2006, p.6) brings to light, “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members.” As convict housing, the Barracks more than anything evokes such segregation of communities—freeman and slave, well and sick, government and citizen. Next, who and what is defined as ‘Australian’ is forever changing. The Barracks in 1819 had not housed citizens, but ‘convicts’ and in 1848 it housed immigrants; ‘foreigners.’ It wasn’t until Federation in 1901 that the country’s inhabitants were even considered ‘Australian.’ This term had previously been used to describe Aboriginals, who themselves were once ‘savages.’ Even then, Aboriginals and other marginal groups would not be counted as ‘Australian’ until the birth of race-politics in the 1970s (White: Hudson & Bolton 1997, pp.13-14). If the concept of Australia as a nation is always changing why should it command authenticity? Through Hyde Park Barracks we should realise that in the present day there is no all-encompassing, monolithic national identity. As with all reality, national identity and the nation have no pure form, but rather result from an active and creative process that engages in the ideas upmost at that time.

Hyde Park Barracks is a historical site and museum infested with the forces of modernity and postmodernity. The Barracks mirror the development of a nation: the site having grown as an emblem of colonialism and imperialism to become a Marxist and capitalist venture. In the present day, the site has metamorphosed into a narrative of Australian identity and nationalism. However, this is not to say that this article presents a stagnant representation of these ideas. In contradiction, globalisation has spawned a “fast, short-term” culture (Elliott 2008, p.122) whereby new paradigms become quickly out-dated. The ideas of modernity and postmodernity become shrouded in ambiguity. That is, the two umbrella groups run into each other and are enjoined into a constant process of reinvention. As a result, tracing Hyde Park Barracks through these ideas becomes a complex task condemned to incompleteness. Still, the task is not without merits. By engaging in modernism and postmodernism and so discovering their implications, we obtain a degree of stability in an ever-shifting world. It is through this ‘stability’ that we can truly appreciate Hyde Park Barracks, the multifaceted ideas it construes and their impingement on our identity in the present day.

Notes on contributor

Amy Rathbone studies journalism and international studies at the University of Technology, Sydney.

References

- Anderson, B. 2006, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 3rd edn., Verso, New York, London, pp. 1-7.
- Bouma, G.D. 1992, *Religion: Meaning, transcendence and community in Australia*, Longman Cheshire Pty Ltd, Melbourne.
- Cowlishaw, G. 2009, *The City's Outback*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, pp. 160-190.
- Dunn, B. (2009) ‘Myths of globalisation and the new economy’, *International Socialism*, 121, pp.75-97, <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php?id=509&issue=121>.
- Elliott, A. 2008, *Making the Cut: How Cosmetic Surgery is Transforming Our Lives*, Reaktion, London, pp.109-145.
- Gillen, P. & Ghosh, D. 2007, *Colonialism and Modernity*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, Australia, pp. 8-25 and 26-44.
- Hudson, W. & Bolton, G. 1997, *Inventing Australia revisited*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, Australia, pp. 12-22.
- Kant, I. 1784, ‘An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment,’’ *Berlinische Monatsschrift*.
- Lumley, R. 1988, *The Museum time-machine*, Routledge, New York.
- Liotard, J. 1984, *The Postmodern Condition*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Liotard, J. 1997, *Postmodern Fables*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp. 83-101.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. 1848, *The Communist Manifesto*.
- McAllister, M. (ed.) 2006, *Hyde Park Barracks Museum Guidebook*, Historic Houses Trust, Sydney.
- Merivale, H. 1861, *Lectures on Colonization and Colonies: delivered before the University of Oxford in 1839, 1840 and 1841*, Green, Longman and Roberts, London, pp. 487-512 and 513-523.
- Shaw, A.G.L. & Nicolson, H.D. 1966, *Growth & Development in Australia*, Angus & Robertson LTD, Sydney
- State Planning Authority of NSW 1965, *Hyde Park Barracks*, Angus & Robertson LTD, New South Wales, Australia.

- Thomas, N. 1994, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government*, Melbourne University Press, Victoria, Australia, pp. 170-195.
- Wright, W. 2004, *A Short History of Progress*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, pp. 1-27.