

# ***“From Progress to Process”: Locating the Transformation of ‘Progress’ within Australian History***

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This thesis explores how the Enlightenment values of reason, freedom and progress has shaped and continues to shape the social welfare practices of Australian society. It demonstrates how the idealisms of colonialism cemented the universal narrative of progress into the very framework of civilisation, mapping the government’s quest for perfection in light of its founding as a place of correction, a penal colony for Great Britain. Through an analysis of progress’ manifestation into the realm of institutionalisation, it questions the very validity of Enlightenment sentiments and its latent paradoxical nature as a rationale for freedom, yet simultaneously, confinement and restriction. Using the development of the Female Orphan School Parramatta, from an early colonial orphanage to a mental asylum, it unlocks the possibility of modernity acting as a form of cannibalism, ironically consumed in destroying its own inherent structures and ideals through the practical manifestations of its ways of thinking. Drawing upon the work of Nietzsche and Baudrillard, the denunciation of metanarratives such as progress, is unveiled through an analysis of history’s relativity. The postmodern conception of individual truth, Foucault’s professing of discourse, gives rise to the notion of history as a product of contemporary society’s knowledge, rather than an objective reflection of the past.

Upon the banks of Parramatta River, secluded behind the University of Western Sydney, stands the historically enriched Female Orphan School. It towers over the individual, in all of its colonial-inspired architectural glory, as the first purposely-built social welfare institution and three-story building within Australia (1813) (Collison, 1986). The school is a lasting reminder of Australia’s settlement as a penal colony, the essence of how the Enlightenment manifested within the country’s early history. Focusing on the progression of humanity out of its origins as a place of punishment and isolation, it is often forgotten that Australia’s social welfare history was innately derived from colonization (Gillan & Ghosh, 2007). That this country became a hallmark of Enlightenment principles, the modern trinity of ‘reason, nature and progress’ (Lyon, 1999, p.10) speaks architecturally. Architecture became a solidification of ideals underpinning Australia’s socio-cultural and political structure. For Governor Macquarie, buildings themselves denoted the libertarian ideals of modernity, more than just places of practicality, but: ‘visible symbols of the Enlightenment values’ (Gascoigne, 2002, p.15). Yet what is often overlooked is the paradoxical notion that the modern era ushered in. From the offset of colonization sprouted an obsession for perfection. The misguided desire to be greater than prior generations, through radically different practices, can be traced as the ongoing cannibalism of modernity itself (Tanner & Associates, 2000).

Focusing on the core of Enlightenment philosophy, ‘progress’, we shall examine the ways that social welfare lead to widespread institutional practices (Judge, 1987), calling into question the validity of progress, espousing its mythological existence throughout history. This becomes a springboard for examining the postmodern

conception that history cannot possibly be objective, singular, nor a concrete product of the past. Rather, history, as Nietzsche formulated through his concept of ‘nihilism’ (Lyon, 1999, p.11), is a mere representation of one individual’s perspective, shaped by current societal values and personal context, witnessed through representations of the Orphan School. There is no longer a concept of reality; the ‘progress’, which this building and Australia in general professed astutely, is invalid. This ‘metanarrative’ (Sim, 1999, p.76) is rendered altogether obsolete. Although progress is still a blatant objective of Western civilisation, it acts as a mere façade, an illusion distilling hope and providing the population something to live for.

### **It began with a fleet of criminals**

Undeniably, colonization ushered in the foundations of modernity within the establishment of European Australia (Gasgoigne, 2002). Usurping traditions of Aboriginal tribal law (the Orphan School established on an indigenous ceremonial site), Australia became a birth-child of modernity and its espousing of Enlightenment sentiments like progress (Tanner & Associates, 2000). Colonialism is responsible for fostering the Australian identity today, one echoing the modernist principles Marx and Engels established: ‘All that is solid melts into air’ (Marx & Engels, 1848, p.3). The ideals of a modernist society, constituted by rationalisation and moral self-control, became the framework from which progress unfolded into early Australian practices. This infatuation with the improvement of the human subject, led to the desire for establishing social welfare systems designed to monitor and control the socially marginalised, for the sake of advancing society (Strange & Bashford, 2003). It was the nature of Australia’s foundation within this context: occupied by social deviants, which exacerbated this desire to uphold the notion of progress. Thus, Australia became an experimental microcosm for European Enlightenment philosophy to be put into practice.



Figure 1: The Windows of the Orphan School (Source: Author)

Colonialism is inextricably linked to the creation of modern ways of thinking, historians Gillan and Ghosh arguing it was the precursor/catalyst for modernity: ‘modernism would not (have) take(n) place...without colonization’ (Gillan & Ghosh, 2007, pp.56-57); others like Eisenstadt upholding it as an early manifestation of modern ideals in practice (Eisenstadt, 1973). Colonialism, although considered a product of the past, is a part of history relevant within a contemporary context. The systems by which Australia is organised, from social structures to politics and even the traditions of a predominately Christian affiliation, still frames an important part of Australia’s cultural identity: ‘...features of the contemporary world are consequences of European colonialism’ (Gillan & Ghosh, 2007, p.4).

We can examine such features through the Orphan School and its historical evolution from an orphanage to a mental asylum to its functioning as a cultural museum, all focusing on one of colonialism’s major objectives: the proliferation of education. Whether this be through intellectual means or moral behaviour re-education in terms of mental institutions, a focus on social welfare’s widespread education, is inherently derived from Australia’s colonization (Judge, 1987). W.C Wentworth stated in 1850: ‘It is the paramount duty of the Government to provide for the instruction of the people, and to reclaim it from the moral taint attaching to it, by elevating and enlightening the minds of its inhabitants’ (Gascoigne, 2002, p.117), mirroring contemporary society’s rationale in many ways. The school itself, ‘fully funded by the colonial government’ (UWS, 2000, p.1), originated out of colonialism, eleven of sixteen staff members being convicts themselves. Colonial Gregorian architecture enshrined European modern notions of ‘civic virtue’ (Gascoigne, 2002, p.15), the school said to have been modeled off the Airds House, Scotland (Tanner & Associates, 1999). Colonialism set a necessary precedence for the ideal of progress.



Figure 2: Colonial Gregorian Architecture (Source: Author)

### **For the sake of progress**

It is unnerving to imagine Australian society without the state's management of social welfare. This nation has experienced a gradual evolution in its policies around caring not only for the wayward, but the average citizen's needs. According to Green, Australia is considered a 'liberal welfare state' (Green, 2002, p.16), the government supporting those who make an active contribution to society. Social welfare derives from one's willingness to work, an economic function which coordinates welfare. In this capitalist society, the production of wealth dictates the production of social support. One's role in the gears of capitalism in turn determines one's Australian identity, your citizenship. Thus, contributing to the country through the means of work and receiving earned support, equates to: 'welfare as social policy citizenship' (Shaver, 2002, p.332).



Figure 3: Beneath the ground floor lies the cellars (Source: Author)

The Orphan School acts as a lasting reminder of how such welfare policies evolved into today's system, examined through ideological goals which framed the beginnings of social welfare, identical ideologies shaping contemporary Australia. Dictating such values is the ever-present hope of progress, that through establishing such buildings as orphanages to care for destitute children, society was building a more advanced humanity, one supporting 'a milestone' (Tanner & Associates, 2000, p.37) in moral discipline and equality. Before this initiation, historians like Jude, have classified orphan treatment as the 'Abandonment Era' (Judge, 1987, p.13). Children were sold into practical slavery as manual labourers, before reaching their teens.

Communities often associate orphanages and related institutions as places of abuse, trauma and social dislocation. Although there are clear cases of this being orchestrated, it is essential that this is 'viewed against contemporary conditions and

attitudes' (Tanner & Associates, 2000, p.7) of its context. Like all social practices today, there was a clear belief in progress, that the strict discipline of individuals in need was to ensure they could aptly adopt the broader values of the community. In 1829, The Orphan School Ladies Committee requested: 'two or three dark cells be erected near the building...for the purpose of confining, for punishment...' (Collison, 1986, p.7). Yet in comparison to the European world, Australia was the most progressive, triumphing notions of civil liberty and equal rights, not replicating the austere workhouses of Britain, but places where children 'were...provided with some education, allowed some time to play as well as work' (Tanner & Associates, 2000, p.7). It is indicative that Australia's social welfare policies became a hallmark of, what postmodernism calls, the progress 'narrative'.



Figure 4: The erection plaque of the orphanage (Source: Author)

### **Out of sight, out of mind**

Buildings like the Orphan School aptly represent the widespread initiation of institutionalisation, a growing practice of colonial social welfare. Such institutions form a vital historical understanding of how progress came to justify notions of isolation, confinement and seclusion. This opens a gateway to exploring the paradoxical nature of progress; its ideals - from democracy to liberty- were constricted in the institution, as a rationale for progress itself. The question for analysis derives from this: 'Why...did practices of exclusion proliferate over the modern period, precisely when legal and political concepts of 'freedom' were invented?' (Strange & Bashford, 2003, p.1). Perhaps progress was not a reality of the modern movement, but rather, a myth.

Evolving from the establishment of orphanages in Australia, came a much greater desire for institutionalisation through the mental asylum. If orphanages were seen as

necessary tools for facilitating progress for future generations, more pressing issues in current generations sprouted from a fear of mental illness (Lewis, 1988).



Figure 5: Window bars were a common feature of institutions to prevent residents escaping. (Source: Author)

Colonialism was inextricably linked to the notion of criminality, those who settled here were socially undesirable and in need of moral correction, spreading to the treatment of mental illness, society articulating insanity as a crime itself (Judge, 1987). The 1843 ‘Dangerous Lunatics Act’ (Tanner & Associates, 2000, p.25) became the first piece of legislation outlining the charging of an individual with lunacy, showcasing a general attitude towards lumping all socially undesirables into one category: non-human, since they did not uphold the spirit of modernity within their community, challenging the place of progress (Lewis, 1988). Progress encouraged the radicalisation of social welfare into institutional practices, emphasising a clear social division amongst the population. The issue remains, whether this can thus be classified as progress, when the limiting of personal freedom and stunting of equality is **not** an ideological facet of modernity.

Perhaps progress in this sense, should be denoted simply as ‘change’ and not actual ‘improvement’. The Orphan School was closed in 1886, after the 1882 State Children Relief Act advocated the foster care system as more progressive towards ‘the orphan’s best interests’ (Collison, 1989, p.14). Yet can this be called ideological progress, when the orphanage became the Rydalmere Mental Asylum two years later? Institutionalisation had not ended, it had simply taken a new, more inhumane form: ‘straight jackets...padded-cells and cupboards’ (Judge, 1987, p.23). Contemporary society generally reflects an adverse attitude to sites of seclusion, however, these

institutions are not features of a distant past, with Rydalmere Asylum closing in 1989 (UWS, 2000, p.1). Even today, the same underlying reasons behind institutions, like the surveillance of the population, still exist, according to Foucault's postmodern perceptions, have been amplified (Strange & Bashford, 2003).



Figure 6: The original wash sheds of the mental asylum (Source: Author)

Answering how exclusion could be justified as the pathway to progress, one must consider the mind-frame of early modern society. Compulsions to advance the human spirit into new territory, formulated policies of protection. Mental illness sufferers, as social deviants, needed to be protected from themselves, thus practices of isolation became the pathway to re-enlightening the humanity they had shunned. A life devoid of rationality was a displacement of humanity itself, humanity being the essence of freedom (Lewis, 1988). Thus, institutionalisation was justified as a driver of progress for those who strayed from its values: 'the confidence that it was possible to put humanity...on the path of perfection...creating new institutions ...which would remold human nature into more acceptable forms' (Gascoigne, 2002, p.4). This remolding infatuates contemporary society, witnessed through rises in family counseling, life coaches and psychologists. Bookstore self-help sections are the fastest growing, whilst 'experts bombard us daily with advice on how to improve our lives' (Harris, 2007, p.12).



Figure 7: The view of the outside world, similar to what Rydalmere patients would have seen as they washed their faces of a morning. (Source: Author)

Linked to this need to isolate members of society, is the rationale to protect those classified as ‘normal’ (Hortulanus, Machielse & Meeuwesen, 2006, p.25). In order for the community to develop, the contagions, threatening development, must be weeded out. Not only does this mirror the modern prison system but the general belief of contemporary society. The attitude towards mental patients: ‘venerable and dangerous to the wider community’(Strange & Bashford, 2003, p.6) is one attributed to all social minority groups, which our society is inherently guilty for.

Institutional treatment did evolve from one of physical restraint to a general attitude towards caring for its inhabitants. However, closely examining the case of mental asylums criticises the notion that progress was truly occurring. Rather, the belief in progress and its reflected practices, resulted in the cannibalism of other modern values. Modernity was not satisfied with keeping institutions as they were, and this came at the expense of patient’s wellbeing: ‘subordinated to the needs of the institution’ (Lewis, 1988, p.13) growing in size to meet increasing radicalised classifications of mental instability. Progress took a nasty turn; those deemed to belong were narrowed down as a measure of exclusivity, an exclusivity denoting major issues for social identity today. Ultimately, progress was never a universal value of modernity, it was a carefully manipulated discourse, wielded as a social weapon by those in control.



Figure 8: No. 15 shower at the asylum (Source: Author)

This disillusioned perception of the modern application towards social relations and its irrevocable failure in fulfilling the ideals it proposes, showcases a postmodern association towards systems of power and knowledge (Burke, 2000). Rather than a single reality being applicable to society as a whole, the 1960s ‘expressive revolution’ (Lyon, 1999, p.7) upheld that objectivity was a myth exploited by governments to maintain state-wide control. Truth no longer equated with universal progress, ‘truth in its very nature, is historical and contextual’ (Mitchell & Isaacs, 2004, p.60). Modernity itself created a fissure for postmodern thought to seep through, its advocates loosely associated with early Marxist principles (Lyotard, 1994).

### **The Beginning of the End**

‘My memory is again in the way of your history...

Your history gets in the way of my memory...’

-Agha Shahid Ali, (Gillan & Ghosh, 2007p.67)-

From this criticism of the place of universal truths, what Lyotard denoted as an ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (Lyotard, 1994, p.36), the grand stories/values which govern modern society, we arrive at the postmodern view of the world. If history is told by those with power, the question of its objectivity, its very validity, is overtly questioned. History cannot be rational and non-biased in the relative nature of its construction, based on context and the composer’s underlying purpose. There is an inherent agenda behind all that is presented, and from here sprouts Nietzsche’s formulation of Endism, denouncing the validity of various philosophical standpoints, in this case, history’s existence. The end of history became the concept of nihilism, where reality is fluid and ‘systems of reason...are actually systems of persuasion’ (Lyon, 1999, p.11). Born out of the fragments of tradition, is an evolution of

approaches towards history, from the providence of God, to the narrative of progress, to the Nietzschean world of nihilism.



Figure 9: The Orphan School in its current state as an exhibition gallery (Source: Author)

Fukuyama (1989) coined the term 'history with a purpose' (Sims, 1999, p.72), meaning that history is the 'realisation of some grand metaphysical scheme' (ibid). It is this concept of purpose, which shapes the present-day construction of the Orphan School, selecting to represent the orphanage in a certain light to attract community interest. Subjectivity not only applies to the constructor of history, but also those who receive it, since their own personal context will manipulate how history is understood. The individual: 'rediscovers in history the meaning he has suspected was there' (Ricoeur, 1965, p.35). Visiting the Orphan School, it is clear that the community has certain pre-conceptions about its nature (the mistreatment of inhabitants), the institution pandering to this. The information posters are presented on a grungy backdrop with an ink-splatted font, denoting this sense of rugged disorderliness, highlighting the extensive list of patient illnesses. Ranging from nostalgia to puberty to epilepsy, clearly absurdist reasons for institutionalising, emphasises the mistreatment and ignores the innovations of such establishments (UWS, 2000).



Figure 10: One of Anne Ferran's photographs in her series '*Carnal Knowledge*', about the loss of identity in history for all those who came through this institution's walls, featured in the gallery. (Source: Author)

If postmodernity champions the subjective over the objective, and the multiplicity of truth, then the question becomes, why is history presented in the singular? The place of the metanarrative, echoed by modernity, upheld the notion of single answers, single stories, single truths through rationality and consequently, universality. Clearly, 'history' should in fact be referred to as 'histories'. Universality never existed, according to Burke: 'All they have done in the past is legitimate the power of



Figure 11: Greene's exhibition (Source: Author)

those who know and deny power to those who do not' (Burke, 2000, p.4). We can see the various 'histories' of the Orphan School in its current facilitation as an art gallery. Many artworks choose to present the orphanage's idyllic environment, whilst others focus on the lack of individuality such places caused, representing a sense of trauma. Yet none are more valid than the next, since objectivity has been liquidated. Barthes'

theory: *Death of the Author* (1967), resonates here as the omnipotence of authorship cannot possibly exist when ‘objective history is authorless’ (Mitchell & Isaacs, 2004, p.66). With relativity also applying to the responder, based on individual interpretation, Derrida affirms that authority in this sense is obsolete, since authors cannot force meaning onto the text (Lyon, 1999).

History cannot be examined through one perspective, it is innately connected to other representations/events, which assist in affirming the knowledge it chooses to uphold, what Kristeva calls ‘intertextuality’ (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p.7). Visiting the opening of the current exhibition at the Orphan School, Kellie Greene’s photography resonated with the notion that different ‘histories’ influence each other. Greene creates an intertextual and interdiscursive link between her cataloguing of Ireland’s institutions and those of the Australian context, like the Orphan School. The photographs frame a consideration of asylums in general, influenced by Greene’s own history, denoted by curator Swatko: ‘Photography...can be painfully truthful but can also be subjective based on the photographer’s own attitude’ (Swatko, 2012, p.2). Thus, Greene’s exhibition indirectly comments on the nature of social welfare within Australia, comparing it to her representation of Ireland’s ‘culture of containment’ (Greene, 2012a, p.1). Interviewing Greene confirmed this notion: ‘what remains of those buildings really resonates with this building’ (Greene, 2012b, p.2) showcasing that intertextuality frames an important feature of history construction (Sim, 1999).



Figure 12: Kellie Greene (Source: Author)

### **The past is now**

Traditionally, history is attributed to the study of the past. However, this would endorse a modern conception of universality and ignorance to the contemporary realisation that history, with its multiplicity of interpretations, is not a product of the past but a manifestation of contemporary society’s knowledge. Society must carefully construct its past as a validation of its existence today: ‘it is only through knowledge of history that a society can have knowledge of itself’ (Sim, 1999, p.3). History becomes a discursive construction of contemporary reality. There is no sense of a

concrete past, since the past is constantly changing based on societal attitudes: ‘history’s ambition is not to bring the past back to life but to recompose and reconstruct’ (Ricoeur, 1965, pp.23-24). Nietzsche (1879) understood this when he denoted history as ‘chains of metaphors’ (Aylesworth, 2005, p.5). Similarly, Foucault denounces a sense of linear history through his rationale that the origin for any aspect of the past cannot be traced, history has been masked by the advent of discourse (Aylesworth, 2005).

The Orphan School allows for an intriguing examination of how contemporary society shapes the past, through the rise of paranormal fetishisation. History has become a product of current power instigations within the media/popular culture. Society’s fascination with subjects of a ghostly nature, coupled with an era largely replacing information with entertainment, leads to realigning history to appease such interests. The site’s brochure manipulates this obsession, mentioning a ‘dead patient walking in the night and screaming to be let out!’ (UWS, 2012, p.1) as a means of enhancing the attraction of the site’s ‘history’. Until 2000, regular ghost tours were conducted on location, showcasing how the modernist sentiments of capitalism are still relevant today (Gilbert, 2000). History seems to have become not only alterable, but commoditised.



Figure 13: A photograph of one the exhibition pieces by Kellie Greene, hanging at the orphanage. (Source: Author)

On a more radical level, Baudrillard explores this concept of constructing reality through the power of the media, deducing that we live in a state of ‘hyperreality’ (Ayleswoth, 2005, p.1). The real has been replaced by the simulacrum: ‘an identical copy without an original’ (Mitchell & Isaacs, 2004, p.77) where we can no longer discern the reproduction from realism. Paranormal associations to the site epitomises this idea, since the building’s historical evolution cannot be separated into the real from the fake. In 2001, the orphanage was the featured location on a paranormal reality TV program, ‘Scream Test’ (Kelly, 2005, p.1). As a ‘psychological game show’ (ibid, p.2) its objective was to recreate the location into appearing haunted, utilising props and artificial stories to increase fear amongst the contestants, enhancing entertainment value. Described as ‘contrived paranormal experiences’ (Gilbert, 2000, p.1), this showcases how history can be manipulated into a performance, a simulation which has an effect on understanding the site. The underlying purpose: ‘needing the show to be entertaining’ (Kelly, 2005, p.2) led to the

introduction of 'fake paranormal activity' (ibid), re-envisioning history in new and hyper-realistic ways.

### **From Progress to Process**

Our understanding of history and its underlying values, have altered over time. However, what has become evident is that tradition, modernity and postmodernity are closely interlinked. They are not exactly tied to a certain historical context (although emerging in a period of history), but generally interrelated and present through various forms today. Examining the dynamics between the modern and postmodern, a focus on modern 'progression' has altered to one focusing on the postmodern 'process', the mechanics through which historical narratives are represented/formulated. The modern notions of social welfare and institutional care sprang from Enlightenment conceptualisations of progress, firmly cemented in colonialism, within the Australian context. Colonialism spread the need for control and surveillance, radicalised through institutionalisation. Today we can examine how this has been represented through history, through the multiple perspectives and discourses which shape this reality and 'truth' of an issue. This leads to a postmodern understanding that history is not a product of the past, but one of the present and shaped by the future. It is not stagnant but ever dynamic and unpredictable, according to Kant (1964), a construct of contemporary society's knowledge (Aylesworth, 2005). Nietzsche thus denounced the progress narrative's true existence, through the concept of nihilism, since we live in what Baudrillard explained as a world of simulations. A simple colonial building such as the Female Orphan School can reveal incredible amounts of information about history and Australian society, and it is accurate to say that these walls well and truly do talk.

### **Notes on Contributor**

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