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ARTICLE

Politics Now, Now

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The essay I want to discuss here was published in the ‘pre-global’ era. I find it telling that Meaghan’s ‘Politics Now: Anxieties of a Petit-Bourgeois Intellectual’, dated 14 July 1985 in its appearance in *The Pirate’s Fiancée* in 1988, was first published in *Intervention* in Sydney and shortly afterwards as lead essay in *Framework* in London: that way people in London would actually be able to read it as well.¹ In his introduction, the *Framework* editor Paul Willemen linked the essay to one of Judith Williamson’s in *New Socialist* in September 1986, where she had occasion to protest ‘against the prevailing tendency on the British cultural “left” to proclaim the virtues of ideological regimes exemplified by *Dallas* and *Dynasty*’.² These were connections that had to be forged by hand, as it were, rather than simply by clicking a ‘follow’ button on Academia.edu.

‘Politics Now’ marked an important moment for me, and over the years since I kept going back to the essay because of the way it opened my eyes to a new kind of cultural studies *style*, which also meant a new kind of cultural studies *thought*. I don’t think the two can be separated, and the novelty is only exciting in the forging of that kind of conjuncture: style without thought is mere *belle-lettrism*, and thought without style is crippling austerity. And that was how one of the major arguments in the essay played out as it discussed the configurations of Left politics, postmodernism (that wave was rolling in at the time), feminism and formalism: one can’t be dismissive of formal inventions and experiments simply because more real and urgent politics has to be carried out elsewhere. Of course, Meaghan doesn’t highlight her own stylistic innovations. At the time, they were stunningly original, and I will spell out a couple of them below.

The time was 1985, and I had arrived at the New South Wales Institute of Technology to take up a lecturing job. In mid-July, at NSWIT, there was a conference on Culture the Arts,

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Media and Radical Politics (CAMARP) at which Meaghan was a speaker. I can remember hanging on every word of the ‘Politics Now’ address, and coming away enthused by the possibilities for writing cultural studies, or, as Paul Willeman editorialised in his short preface, ‘the exercise of a critical imagination’. This is something that was sorely needed in 1985: critical pleasure rather than late resonances of Stalinist or Maoist purges, a tone that some at the CAMARP conference were quite used to. This was what Meaghan had the guts to take on, to quote from the article: ‘things are too urgent now for the left to be giving up its imagination, or whatever imagination the Left’s got left’.

It is useful to contrast the ‘now’ of that time and today, thirty years later, where so much has changed, yet there is still a yawning gap where the imagination of the Left used to be. Today, it is shocking to realise, an event called ‘Radical Politics’ would not mean a conference of the Left any more, but a conference at which the speakers would include the opportunistic radical Right, figures like Andrew Bolt, Judith Sloan, Keith Windschuttle and their friends. I mention Keith Windschuttle because in 1985 I had moved into his recently vacated office at NSWIT and found some of his course notes on Marxism and the Media lingering in the filing cabinet.

Even as the conference on Culture the Arts, Media and Radical Politics was happening it seemed that rats were leaving the sinking ship. Left politics had to move away from the rigidity of the older class struggles among men, and was fragmenting into all sorts of movements, while in the academy it was made more difficult to even talk about through the rise of theoretical languages for which one needed a whole apprenticeship. The reactionary forces were gathering.

So, on the streets the mood went from the cheerfulness of ‘Land Rights for Gay Whales’ bumper stickers, as if politics in the public sphere still had something of a sporting competition about it, to the much more oppressive language that Meaghan is targeting in her piece. Could it be possible that the Left’s critique of postmodernist language migrated via the neo-cons into the newspapers to become the culture wars that are still with us today? Meaghan pinpointed that shift: ‘At times it almost seems that the characteristic Left theoretical question has become —“*What’s all this crap, then?*”’

Now, I don’t know if Keith Windschuttle left the NSWIT building after a disagreement with the authoritarian Marxist Dean, Bill Bonney, but he headed down-town and a decade later was sent in to the front line of the culture wars by The Australian newspaper and figures like Gerard Henderson, and became something of a pioneering neo-con with his *The Killing of History* book, subtitled (How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past).³ What was being unravelled, in an extremely effective counter-revolution, was what Meaghan had called ‘one of the greatest achievements of 1970s radical politics, namely the occupation by the Left of positions of real and effective social and political power’.⁴ She is referring here to the progressive gains that were made under the short-lived government of Gough Whitlam, looking back over a decade and allowing herself a broad generalisation via aphorism, tripping an alarm for those of us who were still confident that the progressive seventies could somehow continue: ‘In 1975 everything was, oppressively, Political. By 1985 everything has become, obscurely, Cultural.’ And while it was the case that the money was still sloshing around in an expanding university sector, in arts councils and film-funding bodies, in 1985 we were unaware that something would happen, later, at the level of ‘positions of real and effective social and political power’ to cause those positions to be abdicated and occupied first by neo-cons and then eventually by genuine born and bred right-wing ideologues who had been languishing in marginalised positions in the DLP or the Young Liberals.

It was unthinkable that we, who from time to time would occupy the vice-chancellors' offices (having been primed on Althusser's denunciation of Ideological State Apparatuses) could face a situation today where 'we' have been infiltrated by compliant Deans as line managers for governments bent on actually dismantling, privatising and destroying the public institutions that were set up as the sensible thing to do as part of postwar nation-building in the era of Robert Menzies. To paraphrase Meaghan, 'By 2005 everything had become, decidedly, *Corporate*.'

Meaghan's 'Politics Now' essay was a stern correction for a Left movement that was so locked into the practice of critique that it couldn't countenance any kind of post-modern inventions:

We hear a lot these days about superficial style-obsessed postmoderns: but the smart young things about town have very little indeed to teach the Left about the politics of authoritarian control through style. We're the ones, after all, who installed a ruthless surveillance system monitoring every aspect of style—clothing, diet, sexual behaviour, domestic conduct, 'role-playing', underwear, reading matter, 'accessibility' versus 'obscurantism' in writing and art, real estate, interior decoration, humour, a surveillance system so absolute that in the name of the personal-political, everyday life became a site of pure semiosis. And this monitoring process functioned constantly to determine what styles, which gestures, could count as good ('valid', 'sound') politics and which ones could not. When I think of the resulting loss to the Left of so much goodwill, enthusiasm, commitment and activist energy coming from quarters not necessarily recognisable as 'ours', a loss often directly attributable to the Left's own conservatism, inertia and punitive style-scrutineering, the fact that some stylish young kid might be striking nihilistic poses in the latest art-exhibition catalogue is quite frankly the very least of my worries.⁵

Is it all Meaghan's fault because she didn't kick the Left hard enough, or that there weren't a thousand Meaghan Morrisises doing similar things, showing how a Left politics could forge ahead with risky renewal and change? Too often, between then and now, we endure conferences where the right kinds of concepts are used, the right kinds of references made, the right kind of critique performed, but where the language fails to spark and the events disappear quickly from memory. We might witness, for example, an authoritarian critique of refugee policy and treatment (fine, you can't denounce our bad government often enough) coupled with art-works, in the same presentation, that actually do the imaginative work of recomposing possible futures: imagination is out-sourced while the 'intellectuals' think their job is to care-take the hermeneutics of suspicion.⁶ The tragedy here is that the intellectual language remains in its unassailable position of moral authority, the perfect mirror of the shameless authority it is critiquing.

Perhaps it will help to do a little formal analysis of some of the things that Meaghan did in 1985 that were stylistically revolutionary:

1. The use of the first person, something we are very used to today, as a fictocritical strategy⁷ of telling a story about how things came to matter and therefore needed serious thought. By 'needed serious thought' I mean 'making friends with conceptual characters'.⁸
2. The use of Australian vernacular, not just the use of words like 'chook pen' or 'wankerist', perfectly timed for the laughter that would ensue. That's not enough. It is the giving of permission, the move *towards* the vernacular that leads the reader

or listener *in* (a reading that approaches listening) that says, let's situate this idea, let's challenge the 'cultural cringe', and let others do the work of connecting one locality to another in the way that Sydney and London can be connected via Left journals, Meaghan's language and Paul Willemen. It is a process of *translation* that has encouraged me, in my own writing, to translate 'epistemology' into 'how you reckon you know stuff' or 'process ontology' into 'what it's got going for it'. Such things help in teaching and in thinking.

3. Understanding that Politics is about all of the following: bureaucracies that are not the enemy; positions of power that have to be fought for, gained and held; freedom to experiment with possible recompositions of both texts and social structures; the use of a rhetoric that is inclusive and as seductive as the Pirate's fiancée herself.

Politics *then* was fought out on a smaller, less global stage. It is true that we had to write letters and use a postal service that gave us plenty of time to think between deliveries. Today's instantaneous transmission and dissemination has provided opportunities that in some way compensate for the privatisation of once public institutions, including universities, so that the new activists can be tech-savvy hackers at the same time as casually employed academics. While risk and innovation is too often, perhaps, qualified by an investment in this digital environment as a problem-solver in itself, the capacity to gain a readership and generate a following still depends on rhetoric in the classical sense: the telling of a story, while staging an argument, while generating concepts to which emergent thought can become attached. This is how I see Meaghan Morris's artful politics, then, and now.

About the author

Stephen Muecke is Jury Chair of English Language and Literature in the School of Humanities at the University of Adelaide, South Australia. Recent publications include *The Mother's Day Protest and Other Fictocritical Essays* (2016) and translations of two books by Isabelle Stengers: *Another Science is Possible* and (Stengers with Tobie Nathan), *Doctors and Healers* (both 2018).

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Notes

1. Meaghan Morris, 'Politics Now: Anxieties of a Petit-bourgeois Intellectual', *Intervention*, no. 20, 1986; *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 32/33, 1986, pp. 4–19, republished in *The Pirate's Fiancée*, Verso, New York, 1988, pp. 173–86.
2. Paul Willemen, Editorial, *Framework*, no. 32/33, 1986, p. 5.
3. Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History (How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past)*, McLeay Press, Sydney, 1994.
4. Morris, 'Politics Now', *Framework*, p. 12.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.
6. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2015.
7. Stephen Muecke, 'What is Fictocriticism?', in *The Mother's Day Protest and Other Fictocritical Essays*, Rowman and Littlefield International, London, 2016.
8. Bruno Latour, 'A Life Among Conceptual Characters', *New Literary History*, vol. 47, 2016, special symposium on Latour and the Humanities, ed. Rita Felski and Stephen Muecke, pp. 463–76.