

# the postmodern | left

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Pomo-bashing, like dragon-hunting, is an activity best undertaken in the suspension of disbelief. By imagining a world in which winged, fire-breathing reptiles with magical powers are real, it is possible to imagine what it might be like to hunt such creatures. Similarly, once you accept that postmodernism holds there to be *no such thing as truth*, you can bash it.

In political terms, such acceptance turns 'postmodernism' into a dirty word. Conservatives use it to denigrate a version of the educated, middle-class left as dragon-hunting dreamers who believe that all cultures are equal and history is a myth. The left uses it to distinguish serious and practical concerns from the 'soft' ideas of dragon-hunting dreamers who self-identify as left, or are made out to do so by the right. Attacking 'the postmodern left', as it were, is a bipartisan sport.

For most conservatives, 'postmodernism' is shorthand for any form of critical relation to the conservative idea that truth is absolute and universal. As Giles Auty tells it in a *Quadrant* essay for June 2000, postmodernism's hydra-like appearances take the shape of 'deconstruction, post-colonialism, revisionist history, gender theory, political correctness, multiculturalism and feminism', all of which are underpinned by 'neo-Marxist theory'.<sup>2</sup> Adopting an apocalyptic tone favoured by conservatives when contemplating the always inevitably 'Stalinist' implications of any so-called Marxist position, Auty ends his essay in convulsive paranoia: postmodernism, he writes, 'represents an attempt to usher in a new kind of left-wing totalitarianism via the unlocked back doors of democracies. Postmodernism represents the neo-Marxist conquest of Western cultures by stealth.'

Ramping up the rhetoric, while continuing to offer nothing in the way of legitimate evidence, Keith Windschuttle brings the conservative line on postmodernism up to date in the January 2007 issue of *Quadrant*. For Windschuttle, Auty's various neo-Marxisms collapse

into a powerful ‘evangelical’ movement belonging, unsurprisingly, to the ‘middle-class, tertiary-educated Left, with its campaign for the three Rs of refugees, reconciliation and republic’.<sup>3</sup> Peddling a series of fabricated atrocity stories, such as the stolen generations, this movement has somehow managed to hoodwink an unspecified but putatively vast number of Australians into hating their country:

The reasons why so many Australians today want to think so badly of their own country are hard to pin down. I don’t pretend to understand them all. But it is clear that, for the past thirty years, the Evangelical Left has bloated itself on such a diet of myth, propaganda and atrocity stories about Australian history, about our role in the contemporary world, and especially about our chief ally and best friend, the United States, that it no longer believes in or cares about objective truth.<sup>4</sup>

Such hyperbole (which is used to considered effect by other conservatives, from Miranda Devine, Kevin Donnelly and Luke Slattery to former prime minister John Howard) seeks to make it seem as though the postmodern left will stop at nothing short of laying Western civilisation to cataclysmic waste. Small wonder of late that conservatives are increasingly emboldened to associate postmodernism with jihadism. Yet beyond such hyperbole, where is ‘the postmodern left’? Where, beyond the fear-mongering accusations and alarmist spin, would you find this new ‘totalitarianism’ that the ‘middle-class, tertiary-educated Left’ has produced, out of loathing for the West and hatred for Australia, from the utterly preposterous idea that there is *no such thing* as truth? Where is this movement’s manifesto? In which books, and on what pages, is it written or implied that the aim of postmodernism is ‘the neo-Marxist conquest of Western cultures by stealth’? Where is it written, on what page, that postmodernism stands for the belief that nothing is true?

Like dragons, the postmodern left invoked by Auty, Windschuttle and other conservatives does not exist outside of texts. This doesn’t mean it is just a discrediting lie, however, a strategic shibboleth, invented by the right to make the left seem anti-democratic. On the contrary, for a certain idea of the left—one that reduces the radical democratic force of the left to a voter-friendly ‘alternative’ to conservatism—the phantom of the so-called *postmodern* left is a very convenient bogey-figure indeed. Briefly, the version of the left we have in mind here is divisible into three groups:

1. The Australian Labor Party (the parliamentary left)
2. Established, left-leaning media commentators (‘the house reds’, we like to call them)
3. Internet bloggers who identify with Labor (self-styled ‘social activists’)

Ultimately, for these groups the whole point of the left, the only ‘realistic’ point, is to win government for the Australian Labor Party (ALP). The best way of achieving this is to broaden the left’s popular appeal, requiring these groups to position themselves against the abstract,

revolutionary and extremist views that 'postmodernism' is constructed to represent. For the third group, for instance, it's an incontestable article of faith that ideas are subordinate to actions (as though somehow ideas are not *actions* in themselves); hence the shibboleth of 'the postmodern left' serves the useful function of making this group's politics seem pragmatic and socially relevant in contrast to the self-serving obscurantism of the pomo elites. For the house reds, too, whose professional and political credibility rests on not being seen to be obviously 'biased', and whose discursive stock-in-trade is therefore one of temperate critique, the sorts of rhetorical and conceptual excesses that postmodernism is often accused of indulging in are eschewed, all the better to make the rhetorical and conceptual performances of the house reds seem measured, serious and reasonable. And as for the shape-shifting efforts of the ALP to be seen as 'relevant' to voters—as a viable 'alternative' to the Coalition, as a legitimate representative of 'popular' aspirations and interests—there could be no room even for a trace of sympathy with whacky ideas about the indeterminacy of meaning or the instability of truth.

But what these groups cannot afford to countenance is the possibility of having become the very thing they shun. What could be more 'postmodern', after all, than a political party that existed for the sole purpose of getting elected, or a political movement supported by social activists and commentators whose only function was to help that party to procure enough votes to win government? What kind of politics and what kind of political movement would *that* be?

The ironic point here is that this nominal 'left', which pins its faith on the re-election of the ALP, is a perfect image of what conservatives mean by postmodernism, exhibiting the alleged standard features of a lack of substance, a contempt for values and traditions, a denial of objective history, the absence of any purpose beyond self-reproduction and a refusal to accept that anything could be meaningful or true. But in the end what counts against postmodernism the most, for conservatives like Auty, Windschuttle and others, is the accusation that it's always got something to do with Marx and therefore with the left. What conservatives call postmodernism is always understood as a project of *the left*. Why, then, aren't the groups we list above coming out in defence of it?

In the past (in a time before postmodernism, let's say) the whole point of the ALP, the only point, was to serve as the parliamentary arm of a big idea: *democracy*, in the radical sense of a project forever without end and always remaining *to come*.<sup>5</sup> This idea (to revive a dead language momentarily) was based on the view that modern capitalist societies were unjust, since the interests of working-class people were subordinate to those of the propertied ruling class. The only democratic thing to do about this was not to seek justice through reconciliation, in some fanciful 'middle ground' between the warring classes, but rather to further the interests of ordinary working people *at the expense of* ruling-class interests. The idea was

to give more power to working people by taking power away from bosses and owners. So labour got the eight-hour day, the right to strike, work-free weekends, sick pay, penalty rates, inflation-indexed wages, annual holidays and other rights and benefits (which have all since come under attack by conservatives), at the expense of capital's interest in exploiting labour without restraint. With increased leisure time and better wages, the spending power of working-class families fuelled the development of mass consumer society and gave rise to modern living standards that nowadays conservatives try to pass off as the result of some originary free market design rather than the outcome of organised, political labour struggles which forced capital into a historic compromise. (This is not to overlook the need for ongoing democratic struggles in response to the conservative-backed corporate abuse of modernity in the form of global warming, for example, or the continuing exploitation of Third World and Indigenous people by global capital.) So to the extent that, today, ordinary working people in the West have a measure of democratic social power they didn't have a century ago, and to the extent they have a quality of life along with industrial and democratic rights they didn't have back in 1845 when Engels published *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, their position is owed to a tradition of politically-conscious labour struggles animated by the spirit of democracy.<sup>6</sup> And it is owed to those who fought and sometimes died in those struggles, on behalf of democracy to come.

Now, how very twee all this sounds today. What a comforting little delusion to suppose that all the complexities of the real world are reducible to a theory of underlying conflict between antagonistic social forces.

But if such a 'theory', such an eventful *idea*, is not the undeconstructible ground of the left today and in any future to come, what could be used to distinguish the left from its political alternatives? Without any allegiance whatsoever to an idea of class, in the complete absence of any form of relation to the *event* of such an idea—what could 'the left' possibly be or mean?

We're not so naive as to think that the category, or the concept, of class is stable and universal. While acknowledging, though, that class is not a grand narrative or a transcendental signified, this is not to say that therefore *there is no such thing* as class. Like a dragon, which may not be real but is still a very powerful idea, the *idea* of class cannot be emptied of all political force and meaning simply because real-world class formations today are taken to have transcended their nineteenth-century origins. An idea of class (along with the idea that 'class' is an evolving concept) is part of the political inheritance of today's left, and such an idea can be abandoned only at the risk of losing that inheritance and hence a crucial part of what the left means. The seeming intent of present-day Labor, for example, to sever its historical ties to blue-collar workers and their unions, raises the question of whose interests the ALP now seeks to govern on behalf of.<sup>7</sup> No doubt, in the bipartisan political rhetoric of

the moment, it would claim to seek government on behalf of 'all Australians'. But what's left about that?

The idea that all Australians could have anything in common—a common language, common values, common interests, a shared cultural heritage or such like—is entwined with a conservative myth of society as a naturally classless and egalitarian state. Why would Labor want to buy into it? Traditionally, Labor rhetoric was on the side of workers' interests over those of, say, bankers and corporate executives, on the understanding that working people once had little or no social, economic or political power at all. What power they may have today was won through struggles (in which the ALP played its part) between competing social interests that are fundamentally incommensurable. It was not won by pondering the 'mutual obligations' of various social 'stakeholders'.

Today, the hollow solidarity of the postmodern left clings to the free-floating signifier of the ALP, a party for all Australians, for crooks and celebrities alike, from Brian Burke to Maxine McKew. In turn, this Labor joins in solidarity with the conservatives in maintaining a consensual silence around the events of labour history. For this Labor, then, for the postmodern left—as for conservatism—the greatest enemy is Marx.

Today's Labor is haunted by the spectre of Marx, which it thinks to exorcise by redefining the left as a politics for all seasons, disinherited from the ideas of Marx and Engels, from the idea and the ideal of democracy to come and from a social-revolutionary history on the side of liberty, equality and fraternity.<sup>8</sup> In its abject compliance with a politics of never-ending policy polling and ceaseless popularity ratings, today's ALP continues to allow conservatism to turn the democratic values and traditions of the labour movement into an electoral liability for Labor, under the threat of a single charge—'Marxist!' Nothing causes the postmodern left to recoil in such horror as to be reminded that the left has got something inexorably to do with Marx, whose name conservatives have perversely succeeded in making synonymous with the sort of violent, undemocratic power exemplified by Stalinism ... and the pigs in *Animal Farm*.

With 'Marx' having been made so unpopular, present-day Labor pins its electoral hopes on other candidates (both real, as it were, and discursive). Yet in its makeover as the party for all seasons, while it remembered to banish Marx it forgot to ban Brian Burke. This may be far from Labor's first act of forgetfulness (the retreat from Marx stretches back, indeed, to the beginning), but by now the memory loss is almost total. In its simulated politics of conversation and consensus—never to be confused with a politics of conflict and contempt—today's ALP plays the game of posing as an alternative to conservatism through the cynical appointment of voter-friendly celebrity candidates dressed up as just the sort of compromised 'lefties' an electorate might be persuaded to buy.

So, with Marx gone, what sources of revolutionary tradition, what well-spring of democratic values, what heir to the Enlightenment project of critical thought and freedom should the left turn to for political guidance in Australia today? Playing 'snap' with the conservatives, Clive Hamilton—executive director of the reputedly left-leaning Australia Institute in Canberra—proposes an answer to this question in a recent essay for *Eureka Street*:

despite the suspicion of many progressives, the churches could be the answer ... The churches remain the repository of the deeper understanding of life that once motivated some elements of the Left. There has always been a tradition in the Left to focus on alienation, the sense of the loss of self. And we can use this idea to understand the way in which modern consumer society deprives people of the opportunity to pursue a more truthful, a more authentic life.

There are many people in the churches who still cleave to that stream of progressive thought. Although I have no connection with it, it seems to me that this is particularly true in the Catholic Church.

What the Left desperately needs is a new approach to morality. The error of post-modernism, which grew out of the broad academic Left and now dominates Western society, is that it has no metaphysical foundation for a moral critique. Without a metaphysics that is common to humanity, any moral stance must be relative and therefore be contestable and lacking in conviction.<sup>9</sup>

Let's be perfectly clear about the political path Hamilton seeks to take us back down in this passage, in the name of the left: at the end of it lies the church as the ultimate authority on the meaning of life. This points against not only everything in Marx and the entire left history of the labour movement (a movement inspired by the idea and the ideal of democracy to come, despite its history of failures and betrayals), but also the politics and philosophy of the Enlightenment. The superstitious idea that we should all put our faith in religious decrees is profoundly anti-modern and therefore undemocratic, having nothing whatsoever to do with the left.

Marx's views on the church are well known and we don't need to repeat them here. But before Marx, writing in 1784, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant insisted that knowledge and understanding, as opposed to superstition, must be sought 'without guidance from another'. '*Sapere Aude!*' he famously wrote: *dare to know*—'that is the motto of enlightenment'.<sup>10</sup> So what Marx inherited was a deeply sceptical attitude to superstition, including the superstitious idea that there could be any such thing as an ultimate authority, like the church. Before Marx, in other words, the Enlightenment was already on the side of secular freedom, *at the expense of church power*. By imploring the left to give itself over to the moral

guidance of the church today, therefore, Hamilton is calling on it to renounce not only Marx but also the ideas, values and cultural heritage of the Enlightenment—a very big call indeed.

Instead of answering the Enlightenment challenge to go on daring to know, Hamilton timidly betrays that inheritance by calling for a return to certitude in the form of a ‘metaphysical foundation’ residing with the church (as a real-historical institution or an abstract, a-historical idea). He is entitled to do so, we acknowledge, but not in the name of democracy or the left. For what could be more lockstep with the conservative attack on ‘post-modernism’, by Auty, Windschuttle and others, than to proclaim that postmodernism now ‘dominates Western society’ and to blame this on the ‘academic Left’? How utterly conservative, then, to charge postmodernism with having ‘no metaphysical foundation for a moral critique’, without considering it (as might be expected from someone on the left) as daring to hold open the very concepts of *metaphysics*, *foundations*, *morality* and *critical thought and practice* to perpetual questioning, in the spirit of democracy, the Enlightenment and Marx.

How absurdly postmodern, too, that this stock-standard attack on postmodernism should turn out to reify the virtual at the cost (it would seem) of any regard for the actual. Our reference here is to the example Hamilton gives of the sort of moral issue the left ought to be confronting, under the guiding star of the Catholic Church—the sexualisation of children in popular culture. Citing one of his institute’s publications on the subject, *Corporate Paedophilia*,<sup>11</sup> which exposes this pernicious evil of ‘modern consumer society’, Hamilton seems to have lost all touch with the real world in his rush to vilify the world of representations. What’s he doing getting all worked up about the *virtual* paedophilia of consumer marketing when there has been no shortage of *actual* paedophilia going on in the church, which he chooses to represent as a ‘repository of the deeper understanding of life’ but which could just as easily be called a repository of the sexual abuse of minors by men and women of the cloth? Is it laughable, or just plain offensive, that this is the organisation he wants the left to turn to for moral guidance?

Of course, a rock is still a rock if it’s called a stone. The Catholic Church is still the Catholic Church, whether it is called a repository of truth ... or a repository of sexual abuse. Words, signs, representations, semiotic systems, texts: none of these things matters. All that matters is the metaphysical foundation of meaning invested in the authority of religious institutions or the ideas that underwrite them. Obviously, then, it’s possible to mount a critique of the church only by submitting critical thought to the higher authority of church law, which enshrines a ‘metaphysics that is common to humanity’—and not by means of some abstract, non-journalistic, smart-arse *idea* like ‘*there is nothing outside of the text*’.<sup>12</sup> Only by submitting to the authority of the church could it be possible to speak out against a global event as scandalous as the church’s cover-up of the sexual abuse of children by priests and other clergy

in its employ. Only those who don't share postmodernism's 'lack of conviction' would want to point out the lengths to which this anti-modern institution has been prepared to go in silencing dissent and the cries for justice by its victims and their supporters.

We think Hamilton should come clean at his next confession and admit that he's been trying to pull a fast one for quite some time now, by pretending to be left. But in this he's not alone. While Hamilton may not be officially aligned with the ALP, his call for what amounts to a negation of the spirit of democracy associated with Marx is all too typical of a left that dares not speak its name—a left that isn't even 'centrist', but conservative. The left that is right.

This left doesn't want us to go on daring to know; it wants us to go to church.

Marxism, Derrida reminds us, and by 'Marxism' he means the promise of democracy, of democracy *to come*, is 'heir to a spirit of the Enlightenment which must not be renounced'.<sup>13</sup> Through its cowardly renunciation of that spirit, the postmodern left puts the future at risk of returning to the past.

In the event of that happening, what would be left to say?

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1. An earlier version of this paper appeared in two parts for *On Line Opinion*, 28 and 29 March 2007.
  2. Giles Auty, 'Postmodernism's Assault on Western Culture', *Quadrant*, June 2000, <<http://members.optushome.com.au/jimball/Postmodernism.html>>.
  3. Keith Windschuttle, 'The Struggle for Australian Values in an Age of Deceit', *Quadrant*, January 2007, <[http://www.quadrant.org.au/php/article\\_view.php?article\\_id=2390](http://www.quadrant.org.au/php/article_view.php?article_id=2390)>.
  4. Ibid.
  5. See Niall Lucy and Steve Mickler, *The War on Democracy: Conservative Opinion in the Australian Press*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 2006.
  6. See Fredrick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner, Macmillan, New York, 1958.
  7. The intensity of Labor's betrayal of some of its historical affiliates could not be more apparent than under the present leadership. Since Rudd and Gillard came to power, the ALP has displayed a seemingly unabashed willingness to carry out an anti-labour agenda demanded by capital through its commitment (among other ignominies) to



- outlawing industrial action except during negotiating periods; by ordering the resignation from the ALP of the secretary of the Victorian branch of the Electrical Trades Union, Dean Mighell, for espousing the use of industrial action to achieve industry-wide wage rises; and in its pledge to prolong the existence of the union-busting Office of the Australian Building and Construction Commissioner till 2010.
8. We're not unaware of various religious, political, philosophical and other currents of ALP history, from Methodism to Keynesianism and so forth, but these aren't the currents that haunt present-day Labor. To the extent that any of them has any continuing influence, indeed, they are among the haunted. The point is that any meaningful idea of the left is indissociable from a relationship, which could take many forms, to an idea of Marx. This is why, for instance, Derrida wrote *Specters of Marx* and not *Specters of Wesley*.
  9. Clive Hamilton, 'Churches Could Hold Key to Salvation for the Left', *Eureka Street*, 26 December 2006, <<http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=2099>>.
  10. Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?', trans. H. B. Nisbet, in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970, p. 54.
  11. Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, *Corporate Pedophilia: Sexualisation of Children in Australia*, The Australia Institute Discussion Paper No. 90, October 2006, <[http://www.tai.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_remository&Itemid=36&func=fileinfo&id=969](http://www.tai.org.au/index.php?option=com_remository&Itemid=36&func=fileinfo&id=969)>.
  12. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976, p. 158.
  13. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning & The New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, New York, 1994, p. 88.

