

Modernities: Radicalism, Reflexivity, Realities

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SPEAKER ABSTRACTS

Ben Gook (University of Melbourne)

'Second Modernity in the Second World'

The political ideal of Communism was an inexorable drive to modernisation—industrial and cultural. The ruins of the project now dot the landscape, empty factories haunted by a widespread judgement of failure. In the wake of Communism's passing, how does the former Eastern Bloc, and Germany in particular, remember and respond to the time of Really Existing Socialism? This is a question of the reflexivity of second modernity, the way it imagines the past, its choices of narratives: liberal reformers see Communism as a twisted road to modernisation or capitalism, while nostalgics mourn it as a better time. Even as questions of who is correct in their characterisation will yield little but tail-chasing, the articulations, the justifications and the rubric for today's actions reveal telling divergences in the use and abuse of Communist history. In the former East, how has the modernising project of Communism been narrated? What does this narration tell us about understandings of modernity today?

Dan Woodman (University of Melbourne)

'Reflexive Modernity and Habitus'

Within sociology, the theory of reflexive modernization is regularly critiqued for overemphasizing agency and choice and not giving researchers the conceptual resources to understand continuing inequality. These critiques often draw on the practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his notion of habitus. Although routinely seen as opposed theoretical positions, there have been some recent attempts to hybridize these two positions but most of these attempts end up ambivalent about the possibility. Both critiques of reflexive modernization using Bourdieu, and attempts at integration, either explicitly or implicitly frame the debate within a structure/agency framework, with Beck and Giddens seen as emphasizing agency and Bourdieu structure. In this paper I argue that while the structure/agency frame is highly influential in Giddens thinking, in contrast Bourdieu was deliberately trying to avoid this frame and it is at best secondary in the work of Beck. Following from this, the paper provides a reading of both Beck and Bourdieu as theorists and thinkers of uncertainty and unintentionality. Seeing the two theorists through this frame points to several resonances in their work which may make a useful contribution to how the field of the sociology explores the various ways people respond to a reflexive modernity.

Amanda Gilbertson (Victoria University, NZ)

'Ethnicity in the Age of Reflexive Modernity: Talking Indianness with New Zealand-born Gujaratis'

Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman assert that there is something in the contemporary social condition that is different from earlier periods of modernity. Although they vary in their terminology and emphases, all characterise 'late', 'second', 'reflexive' or 'liquid' modernity in terms of the disembedding of social institutions and individualized conceptualisations and enactments of personhood. As yet, however, little empirical research exists to support and clarify these claims. Drawing on interviews with New Zealand-born Gujarati Indians, this paper explores the possibility of support for theories of reflexive modernity in local discourses of ethnicity. Analysis of these interviews reveals tensions between an overwhelming emphasis on personal choice and individual uniqueness on the one hand and discussions of community obligations and authentic Indianness on the other. It is argued that these discourses of ethnicity reflect an idealization of reflexive thought and activity, contestation of 'tradition', importance of 'lifestyle choices', and an incongruity between *de jure* and *de facto* individualism. This 'self-reflexive ethnicity' involves conceptually and discursively re-centering ethnicity on the person rather than locating it in social groups or artefacts and practices representative of a cultural identity.

Bryan Cooke (University of Melbourne)

'Elephant'

One of the unmistakable, constitutive aspects of "modernity" is the presence of an historical consciousness that leads to a seemingly unquenchable desire to attempt to reflect upon, describe or hold academic conferences on it. This is because one of the exemplary attitudes of modernity – if in anyway a meaningful term, is the tendency to grant significance to the desire to take stock of the modern world – as an epoch defined by a break whose tremors we still feel as part of that which it means to be modern. It is to give prominence to the question, raised by Foucault (in exemplary modern fashion) as a gloss on a question of Kant's – "what is happening, to us, now." In the epoch in which the eternal becomes the instant (Baudelaire), the desire emerges to capture the instant in a reflection that will at once paradoxically affix the eternal evanescence of the present, while riding that present onwards to a future, manifest in the present, but only graspable (Walter Benjamin) by a *displacement* of the past. This paper takes the image of an animal of proverbially long memory, as a basis for an argument that one of the defining aspects of 'modernity' is a peculiar operation of memory and the oblivion of memory (*anamnēsis* and amnesia) through which the past – repeatedly becomes s an 'undiscovered country' – at the moment that it has been used to grasp the singularity of the present and then consigned to oblivion. Thus begins a peculiar dialectic by which an aspect of the past starts to *loom* –a veritable elephant in the room, at precisely the moment that it starts to be written off as something which to *be modern* – precisely seriousness to the concerns of today --is to forget. In particular, I want to address this issue by a discussion of a *particular*, unambiguously elephantine memory -- the memory of a revolution as a paradigm for politics. I want to try and talk about the way this particular

memory is exemplary in having been both continuously exorcised and proving unexorcisable— a veritable elephant in the room, whose memory -- during the reign of Napoleon – was first obliterated by an elephant. I will also suggest that to be modern is to, as I will suggest, at once to bury the dead, and to realize that it is modernity (and not less superstitious epochs) to which belongs the idea of being haunted, of living amongst ghosts, of the fact that the dead do not stay buried, even though our task (often politically) is precisely to try and bury certain aspects of the past, as well as to fight against the burial of others.

Rachel Torbett (Monash University)

“boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience.” – Walter Benjamin

Modernity is no egg. Fuelled on negativity, destruction and revolution, the modernist period in art, is a time of ends. In Walter Benjamin’s famous essay: “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, cinema is the archetypal expression of these ballistics. Not only does the cinematic image mimic the structure of the modern world, it serves modernity too; by perpetrating the destruction of tradition, the image and its spectator are freed from the shackles of mediated time and experience. While this reading of Benjamin’s essay is perhaps the strongest, it covers over a certain shadowy ambivalence in Benjamin’s philosophy of time and experience. This ambivalence, in accordance with the title of this conference, indicates a ‘second time’ which interrupts the modernist insistence on the moment. Using films of Werner Herzog, I hope to explicate

Benjamin's theory of cinema in its full ambiguity; perhaps finding something as delicate, and as powerful, as the egg.

Nicole Pepperell (RMIT University)

'Transformation as a Movement from Reanimation to Redemption: Reflections on Benjamin and Marx'

This paper will explore the theoretical implications of metaphors of the "(un)dead" and of "redemption"/"reanimation" in Marx's *Capital* and Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. It will argue that these metaphors suggest the potential to theorise capitalism, not solely in terms of the market or class relations, but also in terms of the ongoing constitution and reproduction within the present, of a specific kind of sedimented historical potential to create a very different form of social life. The paper will explore some of the implications of such a theorisation, focussing particularly on the potentials opened up the interpretation of large-scale transformations *within* modern history, and for a *reflexive* analysis of the conditions of possibility for the emergence of critique and of transformative practice.

Lucy Ward (University of Melbourne)

“Saying Goodbye to Lukács: Reflexivity, Modernity and the Politics of Letting Go”

The act of reflexivity often articulates itself within and through a particular historical and imaginary self-understanding of the ‘goodbye’ narrative within modernity. Both gestures resemble a moment of critical self-determination, often conceived as a necessary conceptual negation, and/or farewell to the past. This paper locates two ‘modern’ articulations of reflexivity and their necessary reworking of the goodbye narrative within modernity. The first is exemplified within the work of the German sociologist Ulrich Beck and manifests itself in the form of a particular ‘waning of affect’ thesis whereby the subject of modernity upon the act of reflection necessarily perceives itself as enacting an ontological move from a condition of “tragic affect” to one of “radical contingency”. Beck’s preoccupation with contemporary individualization and professional risk management ensures that the ontological space occupied by the subject of modernity/reflection is reconfigured as the site of the ‘profane’. In this way his work enacts a goodbye that is not dissimilar to Romantic self-understandings; by perceiving the bonds of community and affect as stable origins no longer available to the reflexive subject of modernity his work ‘empties the present historical moment’ and hence unwittingly positions itself within a philosophy of history i.e. within a narrative concerning disenchantment and decline.

The second articulation of reflexivity and its reformulation of the goodbye within modernity is located within the work of the Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller. The title “Saying Goodbye to Lukács” points towards Heller’s ability to reflect upon modernity’s nineteenth-century grand metanarratives concerning human freedom and autonomy without situating herself within either a nostalgic (romantic) nor a redemptive (enlightenment) goodbye narrative. For Heller awareness of contingency brought about through the act of reflexivity does not have to conceive

of itself as a tragic 'goodbye' i.e. as an either/or conception of loss or future-oriented salvation. Instead Heller's goodbye to Lukács resembles a very modern story concerning the individual; a story concerning human self-determination and freedom, which today wrestles itself from the utopian promise offered by nineteenth-century philosophies of history. For Heller narratives of liberation and/or decline refuse to acknowledge that freedom, if it is to remain true to itself, cannot be teleologically closed or determined in advance. In 'saying goodbye to Lukács' Heller embraces the notion that freedom today emerges as a condition of openness; for Heller there will be many goodbyes, many critical negations of the past, but they will in no way be final, but rather, self-appointed and, always, susceptible to revision and re-interpretation.

Sergio Mariscal (University of Melbourne)

'Greeting Kant or What Is It To Be Radical in the Present'

Radical narratives as imagined in the 19th century had the allure of offering an absolute break with the present. They did so usually by gesturing towards historically distant places where boundaries would be settled or there would be no boundaries at all. A specific temporal relationship would be established where either the past or the future would elicit attitudes of profound mourning or heightened expectation. In a world where the radicalness of expectation and that of mourning have waned, radicalness is oriented towards the absolute present tense. One possible approach is to narrate radicalness as a paradoxically terminal state where there are no borders and hence the question of borders is supposedly settled in a timeless way. The meaning of radicalness lapses into a post-histoire narrative of simultaneous loss and exhilaration. Human beings inhabit their world like

actors-spectators who stand naked in the corner of a room as if in a swingers' party wondering about nothing.

Another possible approach is to enter into a dynamic relationship with others around the question of those boundaries whose solidity is permanently unsettled. Within this approach the meaning of radicalness is constantly re-articulated in a dynamic way. Instances of this kind of narrative are exemplified by moments in the work of thinkers where Kant "happens" to them. To state that Kant "happens" to a thinker is to signal the moment where the questioning of limits demands a radical response and where radicalness is not defused by a sense of irreparable loss. Against more conventional narratives of destruction of the present, radicalness is marked here by a relentless engagement with the present, from the perspective of the present. Kant happens to Foucault, for example, at the moment when it becomes evident to him that blasting open the present is to actually ontologize and hence assume the present tense. This is both, related but also distant from other instance of a radical philosophy of the present, that of Agnes Heller. In her work, the register is that of a radical present that constantly re-articulates the past and concerns itself with the possibility of making promises for the future. One could say that Kant not only "happens" to Heller, but also that Heller gestures towards him. This gesture is a greeting to Kant's universal character, which Heller performs while moving beyond him towards the particular, towards the world of the everyday.

Louise MacKenzie (La Trobe University)

'From The Circular Boulevard to the Merry-Go-Round-About: Lamentation (Tativille) and Resolve of the Destruction and Loss of Paris in Jacques Tati's "Playtime"'

"These days I feel sad because I have the impression that people are having less and less fun. They obviously dress better, they clearly wash more, they certainly have more hot water, they surely imbibe cooler drinks; and now their windows are larger, which means that they can get additional sun, but, in the past they lived on the street more and got all the sun they wanted there."

Jacques Tati

I would begin with a discussion of Haussmann's boulevards, where Tati grew up and the transformation of which he criticises in his films. I then discuss Le Corbusier's Voisin Plan in relation to Tati's criticism of these ideas, what effects they had, and what Tati's solutions are to the problems they created.

From here I discuss how Tati's films show a change in the way of using and experiencing the street; this also involves, for Tati, notions of sterile homogenisation and over rationalisation. All the dirt and disease of the 19th century city (which killed people by the thousands) has been cleaned up removed from Tativille but perhaps Tati is saying that it has been taken too far, and that all the life has been taken out of the city.

In PLAYTIME all of Paris, as we know it, has been removed, and (as Le Corbusier suggested) only a few monuments remain. These are only caught in

reflection and as far as we know, in PLAYTIME, it is only the tourists who visit them.

Nothing of what Tati knows (and loves) of Paris remains. And yet Tati, in the face of something which for him is devastating, closes his film not in a position of despair, but of quite the opposite. At the end of PLAYTIME, we find ourselves in a round-a-bout: a place where one stays for a while, yet moves on. This round-a-bout is also a merry-go-round.

As the film ends it fades almost to black: our travellers head off into the unknown. As we clearly see, these travellers (albeit a bit square) do know how to have fun they know, just as Tati and Hulot know, about the importance of play time.

Mark Hewson (University of Melbourne)

'Blanchot's Reading of Literary Modernity'

This paper will discuss the picture of literary modernity that emerges from Blanchot's writings on literature. In place of the wealth of sub-periods and movements that makes up the familiar histories of literary modernism, Blanchot describes a single underlying intentional movement, visible in all the arts and in all periods, to varying degrees and in manifold forms, by which art and literature are transformed by their concern with their own nature and origin. The modern work wants to be literature (or art), and nothing else: but at the same time, the sense of the category of literature itself becomes uncertain, and has to be realized by the work itself which is thus underway towards its own possibility. This historical phenomenon is linked by Blanchot to the consolidation, in modern European

thought and society, of a free historical rationality, and by the concomitant localization of art within the sphere of the aesthetic. Through this analysis, I will suggest, Blanchot's work suggests a possible convergence between literary studies and contemporary philosophical-historical and theoretical discourse on the concept of modernity.

Grace McQuilten (University of Melbourne)

'Misdesign: Art in the Systems of Late Capitalism'

'Second modernity' is characterised by a post-industrial capitalist economy. In this landscape, as acknowledged by theorists from Slavoj Zizek to Naomi Klein, it is the products of contemporary culture, rather than its subjects, that carry and effect systems of power. In this paper, I explore the argument that critical production, positioned within the systems of commerce, is an effective means to examine contemporary social systems and overcome the critical impasses of modernity. Symptomatic of this approach is a recent development in contemporary art practices, where 'artists' are embracing commercial systems of design. Artists have a unique capacity to unleash human desire in the field of commercial consumer culture, making consumers aware of the subjective nature of industrial production and thereby shifting focus away from the fiscal directive of the capitalist machine. Yet artistic critique, from modernity to now, has consistently struggled with its absorption by systems of capitalist production. The critical potential of art's current collusion with design, I argue, lies in its open engagement with the production process to misdirect its outcomes. Such provocations are a means to

salvage critique and agency in a landscaped characterised by the increasing design and commodification of human experience.

Julia Simakov (Monash University)

Narrative psychology: theorizing subjectivity after "death of the subject" and morality "after virtue".

The present paper explores how in light of the postmodern critique of centered, bounded, masterful subject and logico-discursive positivist model of knowledge the recent development in psychology, which can be broadly characterized as a "narrativist turn" addresses the issues of subjectivity, agency, autonomy and morality. In particular, the paper critically examines how narrative paradigm is articulated in the model of identity as a life-story elaborated by Don McAdams in the US, the model of dialogical self proposed by Hubert Hermans in the Netherlands and narrative therapy collaboratively launched in Australia and New Zealand by Michael White and David Epston. Within the narrative psychology framework narrative is positioned both at the centre of conceptualization of subject and as a valid strategy of knowledge. I argue that narrative understood in such a way opens a possibility of maintaining differentiated, flexible, multivoiced integrity of self. By referring further to the ideas of the cultural-historical theory formulated by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky I suggest that narrative can be treated as a cultural mediating tool accounting for the development of the sense of self, allowing individual to act in the agentic capacity and serving as a mechanism of the development of the internal self-reflexive plane through the process of

interiorisation. In addition, the dialogical perspective, as elaborated initially by Mikhail Bakhtin, allows to ground narrative conceptualizations of self in ethics.

Daniel O'Meara (University of Melbourne)

'Georg Simmel - Methodological Individualist?'

In this paper I look at Georg Simmel's notion of reflexivity in social science, conceived as the quasi-Kantian 'separation' of form from content. Linking this to a *critical perspectivism* he derives from Nietzsche, I outline a reflexive theory of individuality in Simmel which, as I argue, represents a radical attempt to break with subject-object dualism, while also holding out the possibility of going beyond the theoretical grail of 'a *recovery of the subject* without lapsing into subjectivism.' (Giddens)

For Simmel, I suggest, individuality is first conceived not as a putative object of social science but as a *subjective condition* of objectivity in social science. As the condition of interpretation (and therefore of objectivity) in social science, *as well as its object*, individuality forms a meaning-category that cuts across subject-object divisions and serves as an 'Archimedean point' (Heller) in relation to which inner and outer, subjective and objective, and most importantly form and content can be understood as co-determining and unified. So that in Simmel's work these latter become *aspects* of the sociological *object*. This, I suggest, is a perspectivist solution as Nietzschean as it is Kantian.

Is this solution a very unorthodox kind of 'methodological individualism?' That is the subject of this paper.

'Modernity and Politics: "Conservatism of Postmodern Australia"'

Dr. Matt Sharpe (Deakin University) and Dr. Geoff Boucher (Deakin University)

In this session, Drs Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe will moot their central arguments in the upcoming book 'The Times Will Suit Them: Australia's Postmodern Conservatives'. There are three. The sociological contention is that the neoliberal period has seen the advent of an integration crisis affecting civil society (against the legitimization crises which dented modern Keynesian States). The political contention is that today's conservatism, responding to this integration crisis, has bid farewell to its liberal and conservative moorings, adopting a reactionary constructivism closer to the European counter-enlightenment tradition. The cultural contention is that the two sides of today's 'culture wars' -- postmodern left and new right-- share a set of pessimistic assumptions about modernity and the human condition, rooted in common resources: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Schmitt. Geoff Boucher's presentation will focus on the grounding sociological contention, and how postmodern conservatism responds to the

integration crisis through the reflexive attempt to resacralize nation, religion, and family. Matthew Sharpe's presentation will focus on the political and cultural arguments, targeting the 'total critique of modernity' as the key behind today's postmodern conservative cultural consensus.