JUST DESERTS?

Boris Frankel: he's not the Messiah, just a very naughty boy, reports PAUL PATTON.


Frankel's book is intended as a scathing critique of the 'prophets' of contemporary Australian political culture. According to Frankel, the New Right, Accordists, Left Technocrats, Feminists, Environmentalists, Aboriginal activists and enthusiasts of popular culture all, whether by design or ruse of history, conspire to produce an intellectual, cultural and political desert. This is not the 'desert' beloved of the Nietzschean philosopher, "where the strong independent spirits withdraw and become lonely", much less the 'desert' produced and inhabited by Deleuzian nomads, but rather the wasteland of a public sphere swept clean of alternative policies by the twin scourges of economic rationalism and cultural postmodernism. On both sides of politics, Frankel informs us, we are faced with only more or less rigorous versions of the same imperative to encourage a productivist culture and to transform this country into an economically viable competitor in the emerging global market economy.

On the ruins of the oppositional Left, he complains, we find only postmodern cynicism, mindless relativism and a general retreat from the heroic ambitions of the revolutionaryies of yesteryear. What Australian political culture lacks, according to Frankel, is a comprehensive vision of an alternative ecologically sustainable and anti-capitalist society: not just the founding principles, but the detailed economic and political proposals which would show how a society "based on such things as a reduced working week, the redistribution of wealth, as well as the reorganisation of paid and unpaid labour in the domestic and public spheres" might be implemented and maintained.

Clearly, Frankel himself is a prophet of sorts, crying out in the wilderness for a return to the old ways of Left critique and analysis: utopian vision and unambiguous moral and aesthetic values, all grounded upon the bedrock of institutional and political-economic analysis. This book we are told, is but the first of a two or three volume series which will eventually present not only an analysis of economic policy and organisational changes in the Australian polity, but also detailed alternative policies and institutional arrangements.

As an historical materialist aware of the far-reaching changes in the capitalist modes of production, exchange, consumption and communication during the latter part of the 20th century, and sensitive to the manner in which these have constrained the rationalising agendas of Australian governments during the 70s and 80s and 90s, Frankel is not optimistic about the prospects for a radical alternative: "It must be said that the choice confronting Australians at the moment is bleak indeed. Essentially, we have a large current account trade deficit and a giant surplus of old ideas and old organisations."

Undeterred by the historical failure of Old and New Left programs for large-scale social change, he suggests that the fault lies entirely with the Left itself: "What undermined the Left, in countries such as Australia, was its inability to convince its own members, let alone many citizens, that it had the theoretical solutions and practical organisational capacity to deal with major socio-economic problems. It was overrun by default." Supposing that he could overcome this default in the changed circumstances of the 90s and provide us with ideas that would galvanise a population to concerted and coherent action, as well as show us how to redistribute wealth, maintain living standards and convert to an ecologically sustainable economy, without penalty at the hands of international commodity and capital markets, Frankel would be more than just a prophet. He would be the messiah.

Readers could be forgiven for wondering why this undead Author does not simply get on with the positive task instead of devoting 374 pages to denouncing the insufficiencies of others, many of whom would not recognise themselves as his competitors in such a project. It is, after all, a distinctive feature of the book that everybody gets a serve: the Old and the New Left, the ALP, the ACTU and assorted other Left Technocrats; the Old and New Right; Postmodernists and the liberal intelligentsia.

Frankel's ideal of a comprehensive and economically grounded critical alternative ensures that everyone else falls short. Either they have taken the path of economic realism (Accordists and Left Technocrats, along with the economic rationalists of the New Right) and given up the prospect of anti-capitalist values, or they have embraced anti-capitalist...
values but given up on the attempt to implement these through social and institutional change (Environmentalists, Radical Feminists, Postmodernists and some Cultural pluralists).

The scope of Frankel’s radical critique is such as to ensure that he is never without a put-down. So, for example, a dominant theme of his critique of postmodern theories is the manner in which they have contributed to the reduction of politics to culture (read: abandoned political economy for textual and cultural studies).

But then when he turns to discuss post-marxist cultural policy theorists who do take seriously the need for economically sustainable cultural practices, he finds fault with their abandonment of aesthetic principles. Never mind that it is only the idea of such principles that sustains his criticism, the mere promise that old wine can be made to fill new bottles.

Frankel is not completely oblivious to political movements of the last 30 years or so. However, while he admits that marxism may not be adequate to deal with ecological crises, gender relations and other aspects of sexuality and culture, this does not appear to imply more than superficial changes to his own position. Thus, while he is aware that the critiques of mass culture by members of the Frankfurt School betray an unsustainable elitism, Frankel nevertheless longs for a similar structure of deferral underlying his own aspirations.

Ironically, he speaks in tones that resemble those of the prophet whose teaching of weariness, failure and futility Nietzsche’s Zarathustra rejects. Not that we should expect someone as ill-disposed as Frankel is to anything remotely resembling postmodern theory to count Nietzsche among those who might have something to contribute to “the difficult task of constructing a ‘postmodern politics’”. Others have learnt from Nietzsche, however, what many have experienced within the day-to-day politics of some left, feminist and environmental groups — namely that the structures of transcendence and deferral which have governed much ‘revolutionary’ thinking sustain their own forms of oppression.

Indeed, remnants of stalinist logic occasionally surface in Frankel’s text. For example, after allowing some value to poststructuralist reappraisal of aspects of the myth of Australian identity, he cautions the reader that “while it is a good thing that the political culture embodied in the ‘Australian legend’ is being subjected to radical critique, it must not be forgotten that the New Right also is committed to dismantling key aspects of the ‘Australian character’”.

Thus is the ‘complicity’ of postmodernism and the New Right established: not only does the former attack some of the same targets as the latter (never mind how different their critical strategies), but they ignore economics in favour of such secondary cultural matters as texts and bodies, all the while abstraining from offering alternative policies. The silence of Postmodernists when it comes to opposing economic rationalist policies is proof of complicity. Frankel subscribes to a magical kind of cultural causation according to which Postmodernists simultaneously ignore economic analysis and ‘reduce’ political economy to cultural analysis. Anti-humanist analyses of cultural policy simultaneously pursue mindless cultural relativism and ‘endorse’ the attitudes of the New Right. The shadow logic of ‘objective counter-revolutionaries’ is not far behind.

Such a mode of criticism may be reason to doubt the moral credentials of Frankel’s utopia. Indeed, at times he does betray a certain fondness for the communitarian beliefs of the Old Right—even while pointing out the degree to which their commitment to the market logic of capitalism helps to undermine the conditions under which forms of community might be restored.

But even if one were sympathetic to the vague outlines of Frankel’s eco-socialist utopia, one could not help but wonder whether this might not be subject to a similar dilemma. On the one hand, a commitment to a realistic understanding of the economic and institutional conditions of social life; on the other, an aspiration to comprehensive rupture with those conditions. To know whether Frankel’s agenda was anything more than wishful thinking one would need not only a more detailed statement of that agenda but also a better understanding of the constraints upon economic and social change in the present. To the extent that this book produces neither, it is a paradigm of really useless polemic.

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