John Anderson is usually seen as the father of Sydney scepticism as against Melbourne sentiment, and a bit of a Cold Warrior. The very Melburnian Peter Beilharz begs to disagree.

Sydney and Melbourne, the cliché has it, are like cheese and chalk. As with most clichés, there's something in this; climate alone suggests an inner orientation in Melbourne, outer in Sydney, even though everybody really knows deep down that it rains more in Sydney, where umbrellas sell like cigarettes in exam time. The colonial legacy still counts. We need think only of protectionism as a Melbourne phenomenon, and of the severity of Melbourne's economic crisis because of its reliance on manufacturing. Then, alongside the tinseltown stuff in Sydney there's the supposed libertarian legacy of John Anderson, while in Melbourne there's the sense of moral earnestness, even moralising, which is Melbourne indeed.

Viewed from a sceptical distance, the Melbourne-Sydney (or is it Sydney-Melbourne?) biff all looks a bit contrived. Probably it simply looks silly from Brisbane or Adelaide. Like the great debate about Australian national character, nobody seems to take it too seriously except some with professional interest. Yet there does seem to be something at stake here, and there do seem to have been some changes, as Boris Frankel argues in his recently published book From the Prophets Deserts Come (Arena Books, 1992).

Frankel's argument suggests, in effect, that Sydney has invaded Melbourne; Nietzsche arrives in Brunswck Street looking for trouble but is instead embraced by the black of clothing if not black of heart. Even modernist journals like Thesis Eleven have been unable to resist the northern virus. Frankel is correct, I think, to suggest that in some senses radical culture in Melbourne and Sydney are becoming more alike; I am not sure that I would agree that this is altogether a bad thing, or that the process is unilateral in influence. Nietzsche, of course, had a long line of influence in Australia, not least of all through the Lindsays. Probably it is true to say that communism in Sydney was more libertarian and in Melbourne was more right wing. Althusserian marxism may have become culturally dominant in Sydney but, as Boris acknowledges, it also had indigenous Melbourne roots.

Now the left-literary magazine Editions is coming to Melbourne. The monthly Modern Times in its present form is over; welfarism and fabianism are under threat in Melbourne, too. And ALR looks to me, in effect, rather like a 'Melbourne' magazine (perhaps that's why I like it)—sceptical but pragmatic, sober and modest, prepared to take John Howard seriously and to contemplate, at least in principle, the possibility that socialism as we knew it is washed up. So Nietzsche's arrival in Melbourne (via the influence of 'postmodernism' and its variants) seems perhaps also to be a sign of the times, of the global shifts and crises which mark the 80s and 90s.

A vital shadow which Frankel detects in this scenario is the ghostly presence of John Anderson, the figure
often taken as defining the peculiar temper of the Sydney intelligentsia in the context of the Sydney-Melbourne dispute. Anderson (and by extension his legacy in the Sydney intelligentsia) is often derided as a simple Cold Warrior, though Frankel is astute enough to avoid this temptation—even if that was one predominant use to which his thought was put. There is no shortage of people who take Anderson to be first of all an anti-communist. But he was, first of all, a communist.

So who was Anderson, what did he think, and why do people still sense his presence in the Sydney-Melbourne divide? The phenomenon needs to be placed and dated. A Scottish philosopher from a socialist family, John Anderson came to Sydney to become Challis professor of Philosophy from 1927 to 1958. He wrote little, by contemporary standards: some essays, no single book. He taught, lectured superbly if his papers are any indication, exerted a magnetic personal influence over that select group of students who went through the university when it was still small and people talked over cigarettes in the Quad. Across this period from the 30s, Anderson seems to have constructed an enigmatic sense of presence which may only be equaled, in more pedestrian terms, by social democrats such as A F Davies at Melbourne and Hugh Stretton at Adelaide. Certainly people speak of Anderson with awe, tell tales of conversion as he spoke, construct him as a guru without equivalent.

As Frankel indicates, Anderson’s Left and Right followers were united at least by their anti-marxism and their opposition to welfarism. Bearing in mind that Anderson was both theoretical adviser to the Communist Party in the early 30s and then a Trotskyist until the late 30s, the question then arises whether Anderson was just another representative of that marxism-as-measles fat, just another bright boy who advocated radical causes with adolescent enthusiasms only then to bury them in the backyard, or whether there was some more persistent oppositionism here at work.

What then was Anderson? One tempting answer is this question to suggest that he was a nay-sayer—a companion, in different register, of Bernard Shaw. A freethinker, he shared with Marx the maxim that everything should be doubted and criticised. The trouble with marxism, in his moment and in ours, is that when you begin to rethink it you find it hard to stop. This was essentially his path, from an earlier endorsement of marxism to a later, postwar sense that marxism, too, was part of the problem. Anderson often opposed censorship, in academic and political life alike; he also came, finally, to view marxism as a set of self-imposed limits on thinking, which had therefore to be rejected. He came finally to view marxism as a falsely harmonistic utopia which had, in any case, been runined by the Soviet experience.

Anderson’s early biography is part of what Christopher Lasch has called the syndicalist moment. He read The New Age and was attracted to guild socialism, to what, after Georges Sorel he called the ethics of the producers. He identified with the workers, scientists and artists who created an active culture, a culture of creation. In the early 30s, however, he identified the ethics of the producers with the actual producers, with the working class movement itself. Like Lukács, in this sense, he imputed a creative ethic to an actual working class movement which was so caught up with the burdens of everyday toil as to necessarily disappoint his hopes.

The younger Anderson therefore expected that the proletariat would act heroically, whereas the labour movement tended actually to seek meliorism, protection, and the servility of the welfare state. This is one theme which unites Anderson’s early and late thinking: opposition to the state, especially in our times to the welfare state, and to philanthropy, Christianity, and all manner of do-gooding. While other radicals such as Davies in Melbourne and later Stretton in Adelaide cultivated Fabian, localist and social democratic sensibilities, Anderson saw reformism and dependence on the state as the major problems to be combated. In his marxist phase he attacked the state as a tool of social control, instrument of repression of the allegedly heroic working class. Into the 40s, he remained implacably opposed to welfarism but dropped his revolutionary politics in the absence of a revolutionary agent. He came then to anticipate the later criticism, associated with Marcuse in the 1960s, that the working class had been integrated, bought off by consumerism. The working class had dropped he noble producers’ ethic, traded it in on the mere subservience of consumption.

Anderson’s hostility to the state was not only political. He also stood philosophically against the statolatry of the idealists like Hegel and Green, for whom the state could somehow embody the collective will. This, for Anderson, was a suggestion both deceptively dangerous, for the state did not represent a general interest, rather it had a particular interest of its own. Anderson’s sense was that society was and would ever be conflictual. Conflict reflected difference. Marxism therefore became redundant, not least of all because it posited the idea of socialism/communism as a condition beyond class and hence beyond conflict.

Anderson therefore sacrificed the idea of the good proletarian society to that of the good pluralist society, one where groups could pursue their own interests and enthusiasms in particular rather than general ways. Society had no centre; the idea that parts of society should serve other parts (for example, that education should serve ‘the economy’) was to him completely alien. So as the state became more plainly the enemy, so did the communism which was fundamentally statist. Anderson parted ways with the Sydney Trotskyists, unable any longer to endorse waffle about the abstract workers’ state which rode on the backs of the empirical workers. By 1949 he supported Chifley in the Coal Strike, opposing the ban on the Communist Party but refusing to allow the Sydney Freethought Society to hear the case against the ban.

By contemporary criteria, much of his argument sounds distinctly dated. While primarily oppositional, Anderson’s case also has its positive
basis, but this is somehow suggestive of a world we have lost—small-scale, able to work around or without the state, masculinist in its connotations, productivist in its implications. There are plainly other resonances here as well—for Anderson dared to question the idea of progress, puzzled over the idea of humanism, denied that there was a centre to things, and understood that planning generated at least as many problems as it could resolve.

In the most general of terms, it seems to me that it is still meaningful to identify some of these attitudes, good and bad, with what has in the past been called Sydney libertarianism. It is probably no accident that Melbourne, by comparison, was included in Asa Briggs' book on Victorian Cities. My own sense has always been that Melbourne radicalism has been more prone to compromise with the state than to oppositional politics. If there's some kind of process of cultural exchange that goes on between these two cities I'd like, however, to imagine that the learning process could be mutually advantageous. If these are times when notions of Left and Rightness come up for grabs on a global level, then it might also be reasonable to hope that notions of what constitutes these cultures can be negotiated and extended.

The Sydney-Melbourne standoff, like the furies exchanged between Paris and Frankfurt, seems often to paper over sensibilities which are coming closer—about the problems we now face, about their apparent intransigence, and about the continued necessity to talk of changing the world while experiencing it. Viewed from the Yarra or the Harbour, the social prospects slip closer together, more like a tom and maligned photograph than vistas world apart. Sylvan waters that run deep, these optics both jar and resonate as we commute between them and the other colonies, or post-colonies. This is what we are stuck with, and need to respond to, in ways that John Anderson could not have imagined.

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GOING FOR A SONG

Culture has become a political battlefield. Colin Mercer scouts ahead.


When I was in London recently, the Guardian Weekend Magazine ran a feature on political leaders with cultural talent. Along with the saxophonist US President-Elect (who prompted the piece), a clarinetist King of Thailand who jammed with Benny Goodman, and the symphony orchestra-conducting Edward Heath, our boy from Bankstown was given honourable mention for his garage band and pub circuit days in Western Sydney. And then, of course, there was that picture earlier in the year by Juan Davila with Paul Keating featuring prominently in petomonic pose. He has even been honoured by a profile in ALR, and we know what style of underwear he prefers and that he is not averse to a spot of ballroom dancing. Apart from an occasional aristocratic indulgence in pig-shooting, the terms of popular reference for this Prime Minister, unlike his predecessor, are broadly cultural rather than sporting.

And now we have a book by Australia's most innovative and interesting cultural critic, Meaghan Morris, in which this ambiguous cultural icon, both 'street smart' and 'high flying' as she puts it, bobs and weaves in and out of the main essay, Ecstasy and Economics (A Portrait of Paul Keating). This essay is prefaced by the poem 'Watching the Treasurer' by John Forbes (to whom the book is dedicated), and whose poem assists the author in charting a complex cultural map of contemporary Australia in which this cultural object named Keating shakes, moves and, above all, figures).

And, of course, Paul Keating is not just the 'object' of all this cultural stuff; he also has something of an active role beyond his French Empire clocks. Hosting a lunch earlier in the year for the newly appointed Cultural Policy Advisory Panel which will guide the development of a Commonwealth policy, the PM is said to have charged the panel with coming up with 'ideas that sing'. This was just after he had made a speech to writers in Melbourne about linking cultural development to national growth and, of course, after he had made an earlier mark in the wider cultural debate with his comments on the flag, national history and cultural self-confidence. And then, of course, we shouldn't forget his very important cultural role and contributions in the reform of parliamentary language. These contributions came after the essays in this book were written but they provide another interesting edge in the 'Keating as cultural form' genre.

There are plenty of ideas that sing—and nag and muse and mumble—in the two essays which comprise this book. Both skilfully and suggestively try to situate the project of cultural studies beyond the academy and the romantic-aesthetic paradigm in which it has all too often trapped itself. The author puts it in this way:

Both essays nag about class: both argue that aesthetic critics should engage more seriously with the cultural forms in which economic understandings of society have been disseminated for the past ten years; both explore the complex roles of stereotypes and 'portraiture' in mediated popular culture; both consider what it means to speak and write as an Australian in a 'globalising' cultural economy.