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 toam 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.

PETER BEILHARZ, a Melbournean and co-editor of Between Totalitarianism and Modernity (MIT Press).

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 petomanic 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 cultural 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 murmur and sometimes 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 criticism 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.
Cultural forms of economic understanding? Isn’t culture one domain, or ‘level’ or discipline, and economics another? That, surely, is what both marxism and the discipline-bound education and training systems have both taught us. It’s also what the format of newspapers, magazines and most journals teach us: culture, normally reduced to the impoverished category of ‘Art’ has its special place in a curious complicity between even the most ‘revolutionary aestheticists’ and publishers. Both consider the ‘Banana Republic’, the ‘J curve’ and even the religious Jeremiah-like ‘Recession we had to have’.

These are not terms of economic analysis but something approaching moral figures or images: they were intended as such by their utterer and exploited as such by that domain which gives or returns to us the fundamental terms of the economic and political lexicons: the media. Just as Margaret Thatcher used to compare (reduce) the complexity of the national economy to the image of the ‘housewife’s purse’, economics is here simultaneously a cultural matter: a realm of evocations, connotations and associations rather than the clear, albeit greyish, light of economic science. Not economics (‘the base’) first and then culture (‘the superstructure’) afterwards: but both at the same time.

Recognising that it is predominantly in these cultural and figurative terms that most of us understand or grasp what we can of economics, Meaghan Morris confesses here to the curious emergence of “an entirely new emotion: adulation of a national leader” partly provoked by Keating’s skills as a “great describer...eloquent, not hysterical or paranoid, and lyrical, not communicative, in promoting economic reform”. Ideas that sing indeed or, perhaps, whistle now more furtively in the dark night of international recession. The adulation is, of course, leavened with a fair deal of outright criticism, but the author owns up to the necessary ambiguity of her reactions here. This ambiguity is partly produced by her own biographical empathy with Keating (“mixed working class and petty-bourgeois Irish-Australian”) but also, and much more importantly I think, by the urgent plea which is threaded through the two essays: to make this sort of analysis matter by connecting rather than holding as discrete ‘levels’, the political, the economic, the historical and the cultural.

Cultural studies has frequently tried to do this but, in the anglo-saxon tradition at least, has more frequently failed because of a tendency to treat politics, economics and history as forces ‘bearing down’ on culture rather than as cultural phenomena themselves in a broader anthropological sense. The analysis of culture has been sidetracked by an historical tendency to treat it in aesthetic or textual terms, seeing it as a warmer domain of liberation, fulfilment and potential, as opposed to the harder and colder structures of economics, history and politics and their related domains of administration, policy and planning. Even the shift towards ‘lifestyle’ in
cultural studies has only broadened the critical reader's purview rather than question some of the fundamental assumptions of critical analysis. Why not (as Morris begins to do in her second essay) take the ordinariness and everydayness of culture seriously—stand back from special pleading and recognise that it is there at every moment, every 'level' and every utterance: from the representation of 'economic rationalism' to the characterisation of the Prime Minister's Zegna suits and John Hewson's Ferrari.

Culture is, in the end, a question of resources like any other: an issue nicely summarised by Morris in a quote from Rey Chow where she stresses "the experience of consumption and reception...that store of elusive elements that, apart from 'wages' and 'surplus value', enable people to buy, accept and enjoy what is available in their culture". In other words, stress shopping centres—favourites of semiotists, politicians, most people and an awful lot of women—rather than cultural centres, visited by only a few with starkly ritualised gestures and clothing.

If lifestyle, patterns of living and, crucially, quality of life are to intrude effectively on the agenda of cultural analysis, policy and development, the patterns of allocation, distribution and consumption of cultural resources—from artefacts and images to clothing and cosmetics—will need to be understood in much more piecemeal and 'flattened' but also much more useful conception of culture as one of the production and consumption of resources, Morris engages with various theorists of 'everyday life' in the French tradition (De Certeau, Lefebvre, Blanchot) and attempts to relate them to a history of 'ordinariness' in the Australian tradition. This is the sort of ordinariness mostly castigated but sometimes also celebrated by Donald Home's earlier work: the ordinariness of the beach, the pub and of the suburb (see, for example, John Fiske et al's Myths of Oz of a few years back). The problem is that the French tradition of theorising the 'everyday' has tended to depict everyday practices as necessarily resistant to, or evasive of, the structures of power—cities, institutions, homes—in which they operate.

The Australian 'ordinary', on the other hand, is not so much a tradition of analysis as a 'scattering of documents' and a leitmotif which emerges in literature, television, film and advertising, in which a (usually male) ordinariness figures as a 'national character' composed of laconic scepticism and no-nonsense practicality. In this tradition, ordinariness is either castigated as ugliness or stupor or complacency from the high ground of ethical and moral commentary (The Great Australian Somethings or Other)—or, by inversion, celebrated as the stuff of a resolute national-popular democratic identity.

Both of these traditions have at the core a recognition of the ordinariness and everydayness of cultural resources. But neither—because of their relentless grandiloquence—have been able to come to terms effectively with the mechanisms and the administrative forms (in short, the governmentality) of cultural resource allocation—from the Australia Council through the Department of Transport and Communications to local government, shopping centres, museums, streets, national parks (including 'beaches' and 'the bush') and community halls.

Every bit of 'the bush' and, indeed, the entire 'landscape of power' is, after all, owned, managed and resourced by someone. Cultural studies has 'read' plenty of shopping centres and identified the sinister operations of power in governmental and economic structures. Yet it has not, so to speak, made the operational move and come up with positive strategies for the 'management' (and, potentially, the reallocation through training, distributive measures, industry assistance strategies and so on) of cultural resources. In other words, it has failed to make the move from the grand theoretical space marked out by 'wages' and 'surplus value' to the rather more mundane sphere of 'what is available in their culture'.

What is available matters a lot, of course, to people in shopping centres or watching television, listening to the radio, reading books and newspapers, sitting in libraries or going to the movies. It matters a lot, in other words, to the majority experience of 'culture' in Australia. It matters too (despite the author's scepticism about this category) in the definition and elaboration of a more complex category of citizenship, one which can address the resources necessary to complex cultural identities in dominant, indigenous and non-English speaking background cultures. (Examples include access to media resources, fair representation of and access to heritage resources, assistance programs, and so on, as citizen-rights rather than the prerogatives of patronage and welfare.) In making this move, contrary to many assertions in current and rather sterile debate, cultural studies does not have to leave critique behind. It will remain a necessary and constitutive component of a more complex, more productive and more effective grasp of the contours of the cultural domain in Australia and its comparative geopolitical situation.

Hesitantly but productively Meaghan Morris here sketches out just such a path, even if it has to weave its way cautiously around—or, indeed, with the assistance of—Paul Keating and John Forbes.

COLIN MERCER is director of the Institute for Cultural Policy Studies at Griffith University and has a few nice suits and antiques himself.