The left can't carry on any longer hoping the Bicentenary will go away. It's time to face the question of how to upset the tidy consensus view of history that's planned for us.

Envisaged as an Exhibition about Australia for Australians, it will focus on our history and our heritage, our culture and our community, our achievements and our future.

Thus the Australian Bicentennial Authority (ABA) Factsheet on 15 December last. Pitched somewhere between the schoolmasterly and the "Life, be in it" modes, the language of the ABA's publications, especially Bicentenary '88 (the newsletter of the ABA) and the Bush Telegraph (a tabloid publicising the development and progress of the planning of the Bicentennial travelling Exhibition) is carefully tailored in its emphases on participation, consensus, enjoyment and learning.

All sections of the community are addressed in the ABA's plans: Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, women, the aged, the disabled, unions, young people and even people whose stories have never
been told. Central emphases are placed on experience — of life, journeys, of histories, of time and place; and on discovery — of self, of identity, of landscapes, of communities. The Bicentenary has ambitions to become what Gramsci called, without denigration, a "national-popular" form. It delimits a particular space and time — the Australian nation since 1788 — but also, and more importantly for its aims, the Bicentenary seeks to establish or, perhaps, to redefine the nature of the persons — the people — who inhabit that space and time. Hence, all the emphasis on experience, learning, discovery, effective participation:

"that heightening of the senses that we hope you can achieve on your journey through the Australian Bicentennial Exhibition."

or, more economically, and according to a key refrain of the ABA's advertising theme song:

"It's a fee-eeeling ... just like you and me"

It would have been easier and more comfortably academic to have written this article in 1989 or, better still, in 2038 when, with more or less hindsight, it would be possible to look back on the events of 1988 and to join to them as evidence of an historically specific and politically charged celebration of national unity of a particular type. Or, perhaps, as a resounding failure. Or, as a missed opportunity. By then, at least, there would be access to some assessment of success or otherwise in the form of attendance statistics at the travelling exhibition and other events, sales figures on the "landmark" volumes to be published, participation rates in the various community-based programs and so on. But even without the benefit of hindsight, it would, I think, be a pity if some future researcher were to look back and identify the 1988 Bicentenary as a triumph of inane pomp and circumstance, of restrained official culture, as a moment of consolidation of what would, by then, be called the "Hawkean Consensus": or as the year of Barrie Unsworth's Birthday Cake. It would be a pity, in other words, if 1988 was seen as a restricted exercise in what Debra Silverman has called, in relation to another national celebration, "selective historical remembrance". What this means, of course, is that it would be seen as a moment of a very precise forgetting of, most importantly, the effects of settler colonisation on indigenous peoples.

This last point is certainly the most crucial issue in the left's current attitude to the Bicentenary. The Bicentenary, in this view, amounts to two hundred years of colonisation, repression and genocide. Therefore it should be boycotted. It is impossible to deny this fact, of course, but it is possible, I would suggest, to recognise it and yet find ways other than abstention of publicising and, in appropriate terms, of "exhibiting" it as "About Australia and for Australians". This is one central theme of my argument.

Another theme is that, despite this indelible mark on the Australian nation's origins, there are things which can be celebrated. Among these we would probably want to list, for example, the history of socialism in Australia, the democratic traditions and progressive achievements which have been fought for and won, certain values of community, identity and allegiance in local, regional, national and multicultural contexts. I may be beginning to sound a bit like an ABA brochure, but there is possibly a good reason for this — which is that the issues which they address are not inextricably and for all time part of the repertoire of an official or dominant culture. A political strategy based on the presumption that the past two hundred years of Australian history is indelibly marked by a single and repressive origin is as guilty of a one-dimensional view of history as some of the most inane re-enactments which the Bicentenary itself promises. In effect, this stance can produce no political strategy but only an ethical position: the ethics of guilt. This is a controversial point to which I will return below.

It may also be that, despite a certain left common sense on these matters, the ABA is not staffed solely by the tribunes of conservatism. There are a good many progressives working within the ABA hierarchy and on projects sponsored or supported by the ABA. I will also come to some of these initiatives in a moment.

But, first, let me return to the first point above about the issues which the ABA seems to be foregrounding — community involvement, experiences, journeys, participation, learning, life-histories. Perhaps all of these can be subsumed under one category invented by Madison Avenue in the 1930s — lifestyle. As David McKnight pointed out in the last issue of ALR, this concept, perhaps because of its origin, has been one which the Left, to say the least, has not been comfortable with. It has been below or beyond the levels of analysis with which we are accustomed to work. It is about the apparently undefinable areas of choice, preference, the clothes we wear, the houses we live in, the ways in which we define our environment and communities — precisely, the style of our lives. It is the advertising industry's name for anthropology. It's a bit of a problem.

Not so, apparently, for the ABA, which goes right to the heart of the matter in attempting to confer on these lifestyles a place, a history, a value and a currency in relation to the nation. We may not like the way in which it does this, but it is important for us to recognise this, in so doing, it is staking out a bid for the occupation of two areas: lifestyle and the nation as politico-cultural forms. Here they are combined in the 1986 brochure of the ABA:

The year will be bursting with activity, as families, neighbourhoods and whole communities join hands to celebrate ... From great spectacular events to educational programs of lasting significance, the national celebrations will help all Australians to honour their heritage and leave valuable legacies for future generations.

This, of course, is the boy-scout view of the Bicentenary and it comes...
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complete with jolly little pictures of smiling men, women, children, pictures of boomerangs (the only visual representation of Aboriginal culture), aeroplanes, yachts, the odd kangaroo and so on. You know the sort of thing. This prefigures, perhaps, the worst possible outcome of the Bicentenary: an Anglo-Saxon jamboree with a bit of ethnicity thrown in to spice the birthday cake. But there is a contradiction here. The Bicentenary is essentially a “staging” of history which, if left to the official version, promises to be an act of justification of where we are now on the basis of what we have collectively and continuously come through over the past two hundred years. The “we” there, of course, is the “we” of the last two hundred years: in other words the “we” produced by white settlement. If this collective subject and this particular periodisation of history are left as they are, then it is certainly true that as Mary Graham and Ross Watson said in May 1985 to Bob Hawke: “your bicentennial celebration will be merely an empty celebration of theft, genocide and destruction.”

But it is also the case that the writing of history and, of course, the staging of history, while necessary components of political and cultural hegemony, are also important regions in which it is possible to lay claim to certain forms of redefinition. To boycott this potential in the sense of a total abstention would, in my view, be a missed opportunity of large proportions. Let me now come to the question of the boycott.

There seems to be a variety of strategic formulations regarding the Bicentenary at the moment. The most widespread — and not very strategic — seems to be to ignore it and hope that 1988 will pass by quite quickly. As an articulated position, however, the strategy of boycotting it seems to be dominant. But I think that it is important to understand just what is meant by this. If, as is planned, the Second Fleet is prevented from landing next year by thousands of Aborigines at Sydney Cove, then that is not a boycott, but an imaginative and probably violent intervention in the version of history — the Onedin Line version — which is currently being touted. Interventions like this will disrupt the complacent spectacle and show its flaws, the bits that it forgets or edits out of its vision. The same sort of logic should apply to other, less spectacular aspects of the Bicentenary. Here we can safely ignore the silliness of “historical” re-enactment and costume drama,
which can probably be safely boycotted and ignored, and concentrate more on challenging some of the ways in which the Bicentenary goes about the more subtle tasks of defining, redefining aspects of community and lifestyle. There are several programs, less spectacular, but more pervasive, in which this might be the case. This is where the Bicentenary celebrations focus on the smaller social units of families, neighbourhoods and communities rather than on the larger, more corporate and official concept of the nation in its governmental form. A spokeswoman for the Bicentennial Authority stressed on the ABC PM Program on 23 July last that the Bicentenary is “not a party put on by the government”. Clearly, here, it is attempting to construct the basis of its spectacle “from the bottom up”, with the aim of an end result in a more participatory, persuasive and consensual concept of the nation than that provided by men dressed up in silly tricorne hats and frock coats. Hence the musical slogan, courtesy of the Mojo Advertising Agency:

“Let’s make it great in ’88. Give us a hand to celebrate.”

What are the initiatives in which we are asked to “give a hand”?

- The National Education Program will encourage all school students to celebrate their role in Australia’s development.

The nature of this “celebration” and the particular conception of “development” are also crucial areas for some sort of systematic engagement within the education system. Hopefully, many progressive teachers will already have made their mark in their use of the resource packs on the Bicentenary being supplied to all schools. I have not seen these and can make no comment on their content but, regardless of that, it is clear that, in this area of the formation of future citizens, the shape and critical form given to historical, geopolitical, civic and ethical training in schools is of immense importance to any considerations of development. Certainly, there has already been one potentially important outcome of this program in the form of the Australian Studies project at both Secondary and Tertiary levels. The Committee to Review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education (CRASTE), chaired by Kay Daniels, and with Humphrey McQueen as a committee member, has already produced useful publications on Folklore, Archives and Museums and Heritage and, if its recommendations are followed through, promises to have a significant effect on speeding up the decolonisation of the universities.

There are other initiatives in the all-important area of “national memory” which, with its resources of oral and written history, the left cannot afford to ignore:

The unofficial past in film: Strikebound
The Historic Records Search will provide a permanent record of Australia’s heritage through a comprehensive register of old photos, letters, and documents which all Australians are likely to discover in their own homes.

Now, while not yet an Australian, I’ve got a few old photos, letters and documents which, I would like to think, might give a slightly different shape to some of the contours of a celebratory national history. How much more is this the case with the various collective histories of Aborigines, women, migrants, rural and industrial workers? All historical remembrance is, of course, selective, but we should at least ensure that we have a significant say in the criteria of selection rather than leaving it to be determined by the imperatives of a glorified and one-eyed national refrain. The potential of such a database for historians, political activists and community groups is immense. However well-intentioned the ABA may be in this project, it is important to ensure that this potential is realised productively and not just stored in an archive with a weatherproof and vandal-proof brass Bicentennial plaque. It would be a shame if the only history that we learnt and the only resources we had access to as a result of the Bicentenary were those provided by the “landmark” Bicentenary History of Australia — however authoritative and prestigious that might or might not be.

Also under the heritage tag and equally politically charged are projects funding community groups to restore historic sites and heritage trails, and for the preservation of local and regional history. Again, all potential areas in which political, ecological and cultural interventions can be made. Indeed, Aboriginal groups have already realised some of this potential. With a grant of $200,000, the Puntukunuparna Aboriginal Corporation in the Western Desert is undertaking a history of the effects of the Canning Stock Route which brought many Aborigines into contact with Europeans for the first time. From what I have heard of this, it does not sound like a history of national consensus. In fact, Aboriginal groups seem to have made the running on early interventions in a Bicentennial strategy which included gaining funding totalling $7.26 million, including the allocation to set up Australia’s first Aboriginal TV station, the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre, the Woomera-Muralag Housing Corporation in Cairns and the Torres Strait Culture Centre on Thursday Island. I may be naive, but I would have thought that these initiatives are important for communities and just the sort of thing the Left could have been doing if it had not been so keen to indulge in the politics of guilt in its attitude to the Bicentenary. Again, we have to be quite clear what we mean when we call for a boycott of the Bicentenary. If we’re not careful, all that will be left to boycott are the obvious but really not very important targets of pomp, official ceremonies and birthday cakes. The community work will have been done. But not by us.

Guilt is a bit of a problem in the Left’s attitudes to the Bicentenary. A guilt about that massive and tragic injustice at the origin of white history in Australia. There is no doubt, of course, that it is massive and tragic, but it would surely be more productive to — almost therapeutically — transform that guilt into a productive and strategic recognition of our national origins and enable that to determine our intervention rather than our abstention, in 1988. No national history, and least of all that of Australia, which is not a nation-state on the classic European model, is unified, monolithic and simply continuous from a single origin in oppressions of class, ethnicity or gender. Histories are also histories of resistances to forms of oppression — or they should be. This returns me to a point I made earlier which may have appeared flippant: that there are things to celebrate, albeit not necessarily in the terms and on the agenda provided by the ABA. Though it should be said that the agenda has been pretty carefully worked out by the Authority and we may now, at this late stage, only be in a position to respond to predetermined initiatives.

It is inevitable that no matter how firm the agenda for the 1988 celebrations, no matter how thematically organised the events are, the nature of popular participation in them will “overflow” their official limits and provide the occasion not just for the celebration of the “authorised version” but also for other versions of, say, family, neighbourhood, community and nation. The potential is there, given the commitment, to fully develop and organise this overflow into a more critical and interventionist celebration of these forms of social and cultural organisation. But this is on condition that we know what we may be dealing with here and take it seriously.

no political strategy but the ethics of guilt

The structure of the travelling Bicentennial Exhibition gives some sense of the “showing and teaching through experience and participation” strategy which we can expect to figure right throughout 1988 as a sort of “come on”. The “National Arcade” in the exhibition will have six major exhibits based on the themes of:

- Journeys: Maps, Dreams, Contact, Settlement
- An Australian Identity: Myths, Heroes, Woop Woop
- The Environment: Place, Site, Frame, Fence
- Living Today: Pattern, Lifestyle
- Living Together: People, Politics, Media
- Futures: Transformer, Choice, Expectation
It is not difficult to imagine the presence of a Phillip Adams at work here. The language would not be out of place in a modernist art gallery or a cultural politics journal. It is not the exhortatory language of earlier more imperial exhibitions of this type, but more like a therapeutic "cure".

The Australian Identity exhibit
"looks at myths, dreams, heroes and legends, and the search for a vocabulary and icons to explain the Australian experience"

While in the Environment exhibition
"The experience should be interactive, allowing the visitors to discover themselves in unsuspecting ways."

And, in Futures,
"Interactive computer displays will allow visitors to make their own choices in the medium of the future."

"The Nation, be in it!" We can expect this sort of invitation to have its effects next year. Exhibitions of this type have always, since their inception, with the Great Exhibition of 1851 at Crystal Palace in London, been in the business of symbolising selected icons of national life, prosperity, development and heritage. The tone of the Bicentennial Exhibition and many of the other events planned for 1988 seems explicitly to be distancing itself from some of the dusty pomp of its predecessors and, instead, decking out Australia in Ken Done colours for a bright new sense of future and community. Show, see, experience but, above all, "internalise" this sense of the national community. Both a gigantic history lesson and (like the best history lessons) an exercise in ethical training and "self-awareness", the Bicentenary seems committed to the formation of a subjective sense of nationhood effective at the level of lifestyle, family, neighbourhood and community, rather than at the level of the governmental and administrative nation. It is impossible to tell how successful this is going to be. It is difficult to know precisely what is going on in the various communities. This may be a monumental failing on the part of the ABA's public relations section, but it is probably equally the case that we don't know because of our own, implicit or explicit, abstentionist strategy. My own feeling is that, like the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups of the Western Desert, Broome, Alice Springs, Cairns, Thursday Island and many other places, who had the foresight to get involved and get funding, we should be getting involved in our communities to give the celebrations, the history, the heritage, the definitions of national life in the past and future a distinctive inflection of our own. And, on that point, a modest proposal.

1988 is going to be a year of a national "taking stock". Perhaps the official version will say something like, "Well, yes, we acknowledge that there have been a few problems in the past, and we regret out past actions with regard to the indigenous peoples and so on, but look where we have got to now, look at our bright future, etc. etc." The apologists of a complacent and inane nationalism have already begun to utter sentiments like these. By its very nature, the celebration of 200 years is an end as well as a beginning and it will probably be seen, in the official version, as a moment of renewal combined with a very strong urge to forget.

a moment of renewal combined with a very strong urge to forget

Wouldn't it be useful then if we were able to insist upon our own version of renewal — socialist renewal that is — and work to make that have some effect on the contours of the national community, to retrieve some of those experiences which have been edited out of national memory and to insist on other forms of development? If this were to be the case and if, by some chance, the Bicentenary year were to see, as the outcome of this, the formation of a new and popular socialist party, then that would be something more interesting for that researcher to look back on in 1988. If we were able to transform our current concerns and work into a decisive and popular intervention into next year's agenda, then, as Marx once said, the content will have gone beyond the form.

NOTES:

1. Just my luck that a couple of hours after I had finished writing this on a Friday, the ABC announced that the Bicentenary advertising campaign was due to begin on the following Sunday. I managed to pick up a couple of lines from the advertising theme song which I have included here. It is worth making the point very strongly that the ways in which the Bicentenary is represented in the media are going to be a large part of its meaning for us. For obvious reasons, this aspect receives little attention here.

2. Thanks to Tony Bennett for drawing this blurb to my attention.


6. In Black Nation, 5, Nov. 1985, p. 3. Many thanks to Julia Reid, Honours Student in the School of Humanities at Griffith University, for this reference and for other ideas in this article.

7. This argument is more fully elaborated by Graeme Davison in his excellent "Exhibitions", in Australian Cultural History, No. 2, pp.5-20.

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