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A living tradition

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A living tradition

Abstract

At the recent Historical Materialism Australasia Conference (Sydney, July 2015), the keynote address was delivered by veteran scholars Terry Irving and Raewyn Connell. The subject was their seminal book *Class Structure in Australian History* (CSAH), the first edition of which was published by Longman Cheshire in 1980, followed by a second edition in 1992. Whilst in print the book sold at least 12,000 copies, a significant figure at the time for an Australian book, still a figure to set a publisher's lips drooling, and in terms of international academic/scholarly publishing, where print runs of 200 copies struggle to sell, a runaway success. As they say in the classics, CSAH 'walked off the shelves'.

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A LIVING TRADITION

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At the recent Historical Materialism Australasia Conference (Sydney, July 2015), the keynote address was delivered by veteran scholars Terry Irving and Raewyn Connell. The subject was their seminal book *Class Structure in Australian History* (CSAH), the first edition of which was published by Longman Cheshire in 1980, followed by a second edition in 1992. Whilst in print the book sold at least 12,000 copies, a significant figure at the time for an Australian book, still a figure to set a publisher's lips drooling, and in terms of international academic/scholarly publishing, where print runs of 200 copies struggle to sell, a runaway success. As they say in the classics, CSAH 'walked off the shelves'.

In 1979/80, the book was lucky to make its way into print. At the last minute the publisher apparently had second thoughts and on the negative advice of a reader new to Australia, threatened to pull the plug in the project. Simply the book was eccentric in many respects, too Australian and non-metropole for a start, and in terms of analysis not in accord with the latest scholarly/intellectual happenings and trends in the US in particular. However the young authors refused to back down and stuck to the original commissioning terms. Hey presto, a best-seller.

Reviewers tended to approach the book as a general history, and found it wanting, problematic: it took class analysis seriously, was thematic rather than an extended narrative, was too much of a mix with its blend of documents, narrative and argument, and it brashly defied traditional discipline boundaries, the text at once historical, sociological, political. Simply, the young authors were unwelcome challengers to the masterly likes of Ernest Scott, Keith Hancock, Max Crawford, and the soon to be iconic Manning Clark. However, despite reviewer negativities, CSAH sold.

The book emerged from a period of energised Australian intellectual and social ferment. During the mid-sixties and through the 1970s, Australia changed dramatically and significantly, a period some historians have termed a 'cultural revolution' as the skids were put under the prevailing culture that Donald Horne described as "racist, anglocentric-imperialist, puritan, sexist, politically genteel acquiescent, capitalist, bureaucratic and developmentalist". Granted, in future decades conservative forces would regroup and variously seek, successfully in some respects, to return to that conservative utopia, but that was in the future.

CSAH was not a product of the corporatized 'knowledge' factory that universities have become, where scholars are metaphorically chained to computer screens, generating texts in a desperate 'publish or perish' culture. Rather the Connell/Irving work emerged slowly, in a collective way modern spin-doctors and box-tickers would term 'collegial'.

The initial book contact with Longmans was signed in 1971, but the idea for the book emerged in discussions and projects at the Free University, Sydney (1967-1972), a radical experimental self-managed study and research outfit, Connell and Irving being two of the founders. Draft chapters of the future book were circulated for discussion and comment amongst radical scholars during the 1970s, and the project progressed as the result of a series of Class Analysis Conferences organised by the authors during 1975-1977.

So why bother with *CSAH* in 2015? Well, in some quarters it is regarded as a seminal work, and a bit of internet searching indicates it has been a well cited text, continues to be cited, and arguably fulfils some sort of 'need'. But for me that is not the point. Rather, the book's existence, its reception, its longevity, point to something intellectual gatekeepers of all kinds either ignore, play-down, and/or dissemble about. There is in the Australian intellectual culture a strong tradition of Marxist and class analysis, going back to the 19th century and continuing today. It is robust, diversified, and exists both inside and outside the academy, something other intellectual traditions often fail to achieve. Its practitioners and exponents are variously academics and non-academics; its outlets and modes of dissemination are variously academic and non-academic. The nature and extent of the tradition is outlined by Rick Kuhn, winner of the 2007 Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize, in his essay "Class Analysis and the Left in Australian History" (1996). In a micro/qualitative study, Thomas Barnes and Damien Cahill have demonstrated the extent and diversity of this tradition during the period since the 1970s in their article "Marxist Class Analysis: A Living Tradition in Australian Scholarship" (2012).

So yes, there is an Australian Marxist/class analysis scholarly tradition, and *CSAH* is a significant part of this. While the tradition might not be touted as being obvious, or encouraged and/or welcomed by scholarly/academic gatekeepers, it steadfastly streams through Australian intellectual life as surely as an ocean current.

NOTE:

Education historian Alan Barcan uses the term 'cultural revolution' in his *Radical Students: The Old Left at Sydney University*, MUP, Carlton South, 2002, p. 1. For the Donald Horne reference, see his *Time of Hope: Australia 1966-72*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1980, p. 5. For the Free University, Sydney, see <http://www.reasoninrevolt.net.au/biogs/E000361b.htm>. Rick Kuhn's essay is in Rick Kuhn and Tom O'Lincoln, editors, *Class & Class Conflict in Australia*, Longman, Melbourne, 1996, pp. 145-162. For the Barnes/Cahill article, *The Journal of Australian Political Economy*, Issue 70, 2012, pp. 47-69.

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