

From Sociology to Culture, via media – Some Thoughts from the Antipodes

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Ladies and gentlemen, or as Tristan Smith would say, ‘Meneer and Madam,’ thank you for indulging me. I shall offer you some introductory remarks concerning the antipodes, with reference to Bernard Smith and J.G.A. Pocock, and then read and comment on the voices of two contemporary antipodean writers, Nick Perry, from New Zealand, and the expatriate Australian writer Peter Carey, who lives down the road, towards Soho.

Why talk about the antipodes as a way to characterise writing or media in Australia and New Zealand?

The idea of the antipodes is, of course, classical – having the feet elsewhere, sometimes backwards, monsters from the south. It is revived into the modern age in terms of *terra australis incognita*, the unknown south land. In the wake of British expedition and invasion it becomes actualised as Australasia, Australia and New Zealand. In this period the image becomes more appropriately geographical – the other point on the globe, the opposite to that constituted by the centres. Into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the image is, by turn, celebratory and stigmatic. Othering works both ways. Australasia is constructed as paradise, but also as hell, and here there is also some bifurcation between Australia and New Zealand, again for geographical reasons. New Zealand is the green and pastoral land, and even its indigenous people are valorized by Europeans, even as they are dispossessed. Australia is in contrast brown and dry, with convict origins and indigenous peoples who are viewed as less than Greek warriors and therefore primitivized.

The image of the antipodes is revived locally in the 1960’s in Australia. Its generalized stigma is reversed. The mobilizing concepts of the idea of the antipodes are apparent – north/south is up/down, cerebral/visceral, cultural or civilized versus natural, mind versus the dirty bits. Its inversion by the victims down under involves the reversal of these values. We, down under, give you, our superiors, the finger. The new world blows raspberries at the old world, at Europe, and then even at America as it becomes the centre of

empire and the culture industry. We all love Mickey Mouse, but he also becomes the symbol of mediocrity and empire.

In 1960 a more nuanced image of being antipodean is generated by the Australian cultural historian Bernard Smith. As I have tried to show in my study of his work, *Imagining the Antipodes*, Smith makes at least two radical claims (Beilharz, 1997). The first is that the antipodes is a relationship rather than a place. The second is that culture moves reciprocally and not only from centre to periphery: culture is constituted through cultural traffic. More recently, this argument has been joined from the other side of the Pacific and the Tasman by J.G.A. Pocock, best known in America in the history of ideas, and himself raised in New Zealand. As Pocock puts it, New Zealand history sees peoples in motion, histories transversing distance, identities never quite at home. An archipelago in the southern ocean, it views Britain as another archipelago. The strong point of distinction between Smith and Pocock here is locational. Pocock's image of the antipodes is insular, literally, and archipelagic (Pocock, 2003). Smith's is different because Australia is different, a dry land mass, a continent. Both Australia and New Zealand are distant from the centres, but not isolated: they are constituted by maritime traffic and trade, and both look out, and very often north, rather than necessarily in, at their own provincial navels. Both are Neo-Britains in the southern seas.

In Australian sociology, Smith's arguments have been mediated primarily by me, in *Imagining Antipodes*, by me and my colleague Trevor Hogan into a text called *Place, Time and Division* (Beilharz and Hogan, 2006), and by my students and others around the journal *Thesis Eleven*. In media studies, the image of the antipodes has been used by thinkers like McKenzie Wark, but most explicitly by New Zealander Nick Perry. For the rest of my time, I want to introduce you to Perry, and in closing to the independent application of some of

these ideas by the Australian-American writer Peter Carey. Both, as you will see, have a signal relationship to Mickey Mouse.

Nick Perry's most important contribution here is in the idea of 'antipodean camp'. It's a broad idea, which echoes out through Australiana movies like *Priscilla – Queen of the Desert*, where suburban cowboys are also gay. First clue: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was written by a New Zealander. Second, where else would a former conservative Prime Minister – Sir Robert Muldoon – have been keen to act as MC for the *Rocky Horror Show*, an even more symbolic act given the habit of local audiences to join in, to emulate the action as it unfolds on the screen?

Even more powerfully, where else would a Prime Minister in office – Labor Prime Minister David Lange – agree to a meet and greet with Mickey Mouse?

The Rocky Horror Picture Show, the matter of fact willingness of an ex-Prime Minister to act as its MC (Master of Ceremonies) and to subsequently appear, complete with the appropriate cloak and make-up, as Count Robula, (the host for the horror movie on late-night television) are all instances of 'antipodean camp'. Are these utterly marginal differences or central signs of the times? Politics/business as usual or institutional cross-dressing? The same familiar fetishisms or is something rather strange afoot? Another recent New Zealand Prime Minister did it somewhat differently than his conservative predecessor – and did it whilst in office. For example, as the head of a Labour Government, David Lange warmly welcomed Mickey Mouse to his prime-ministerial suite. Faced with the cooling of official diplomatic relations with America as a result of his government's ban on nuclear ship visits, he was photographed in an anti-nuclear 'Nukebuster' tee-shirt whose design was inspired by the then topical 'Ghostbusters' motif. In an appearance on breakfast-time American television he observed that, 'I've been four times to Disneyland, but never to the White House' going on to (accurately) point out that invitations to the latter location had none the less been extended 'to all sorts of hoods' (Perry, 1998: 10).

The attendant photograph almost mimics its historic precedent – Eisenstein shaking a smaller Mickey's white gloved hand in a famous 1930 Hollywood photo opportunity. The message is clear – nobody cares about New Zealand, or even, the imperial powers hold New Zealand beneath contempt – ergo the attitude of antipodean camp, the politics of inversion, the politics

of the finger. Perry connects this to James Scott's fine study, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. 'When the great lord passes by, the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts'.

Peter Carey is no sociologist, and yet, of course, he is. The most pertinent work here is *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, 1994. Let me speak in his voice – Smith's, and Carey's:

My name is Tristan Smith. I was born in Chemin Rouge in Efica – which is to say as much to you, I bet, as if I declared I was from the moon.

And yet if you are going to make much sense of me, you have to know a little of my country, a country so unimportant that you are already confusing the name with Ithaca or Africa, a name so unmemorable it could only have been born of a committee, although it remains, nonetheless, the home of nearly three million of the earth's people, and they, like you, have no small opinion of themselves, have artists and poets who are pleased to criticize its shortcomings and celebrate its charms, who return home to the eighteen little islands between the tropic of Capricorn and the 30th parallel, convinced that their windswept coastline is the most beautiful on earth. Like 98 per cent of the planet's population, we Eficans may be justly accused of being provincial, parochial, and these qualities are sometimes magnified by your habit of hearing 'Ithaca' when we say 'Efica'.

If I say 'Voorstand' to you, that is a different story entirely. You are a citizen of Voorstand. You hold the red passport with the phases of the moon embossed in gold. You stand with your hand over your heart when the Great Song is played, you daily watch new images of your armies in the vids and zines. How can I make you know what it is like to be from Efica – abandoned, self-doubting, yet so wilful that if you visit Chemin Rouge tomorrow morning we will tell you that the year is 426 and you must write your cheques accordingly.

If you were my students I would direct you to read *Efica: from penal colony to welfare state*, *The Caves of Democracy*, and Volume 3 of Wilbur's *The Dyer's Cauldron*. But you are not my students and I have no choice but to juggle and tap-dance before you, begging you please sit in your seats while I have you understand exactly why my heart is breaking (Carey, 1994: 3).

So begins the story. Tristan Smith is an antipodean, more than an outsider again. He is born deformed, as Carey says, like a snail without a shell, to a theatrical mother from the centre who has settled in the periphery. The book is brilliant – Efica could be New Zealand or Australia, but it could be anywhere in Africa, any other settler capitalist location – it could be in the South Pacific, could be French or Dutch, British or American in its hegemon. Carey

constructs an entire lifeworld in a novel that is also historical, has its own vernacular (even, charmingly, for the genitalia) and a scholarly apparatus as well as a vocab list to make the study scholarly, to give it the power and aura of an alternative world view. Footnotes explain that this is how we antipodeans see things, and why.

Tristan Smith is born deformed and pathetic – until he meets Mickey Mouse, or the Efrican variant thereof, Bruder Mouse. Tristan Smith repeatedly apologises for his antipodean manners, the periphery shouting at the centre. But we are also of you, even if you cannot see us. And if we are really ambitious, we can only leave, betray our country of origins, sell out, move north – which is exactly what Carey does, moving from Australia to Manhattan, or this, at least, is the way wounded Australians at home like to see it.

Efica has an elaborate history of independent circus work, derived of its hegemon in Voorstand, but different, not least in that no live animals are used, only symbolic characters like Bruder Mouse – and Uncle Duck. The Eficans are northern people who have been abandoned in the south. They have more than the usual share of identity issues. ‘What are we?’ We’re just sort of “here”! Eficans are losers, and proud of it:

In the Voorstand Sirkus, there is no pity. A man falls, he dies. This, you would say, is the point – the reason a Sirkus star is rich is because of the risk he takes.

But when we Eficans watch the Voorstand Sirkus we do not watch like you. We watch with our mouths open, oohing and aahing and applauding just as you do, but we watch like Eficans, identifying with the lost, the fallen, the abandoned. When a performer falls, *c’est moi, c’est moi*.

Our heroes are the lost, the drowned, the injured, a habit of mind that makes our epic poetry emotionally repellent to you, but let me tell you, Meneer, Madam, if you are ever sick whilst visiting Efica you will quickly appreciate the point of view. If you come to the Mater Hospital with no money, no insurance, even if you stink of piss and have no lips – you will not be sent away, not even if you beg to be (Carey, 1994: 36).

Yet Tristan Smith’s life line is as the mouse. Its suit, in the form of a simi, a cyborg, offers him both a body, a carapace, and a face, a mask, and in this way he becomes an unexpected

star in the centre, in New York – in Voorstand. Yet political intrigue frames the whole story: Tristan's mother is murdered, and his minders turn out to include CIA-equivalents who are rigging the Efrican elections, a reference no doubt to Allende but also to the Australian Prime Minister's Dismissal of 1975 (notwithstanding the fact that no Australian Prime Minister has yet met with Mickey Mouse). That is the paradox, Carey says: we are important enough for you to bring down our government, but you have never heard of us. In the New Zealand case, referring back to the Prime Minister and Mickey, the background context is the sinking of the Greenpeace vessel *The Rainbow Warrior* by French commandos in Auckland Harbour in 1985. Sovereignty, like cultural dependence, has long been a serious issue for the antipodes.

Tristan Smith manages to become a celebrity as Bruder Mouse, and even to get laid – though as Bruder Mouse, not as himself, the snail without a shell. His great sexual conquest is as Bruder Mouse but he screws the Empire all the same. Framed, exposed, he becomes a fugitive, yet the story has an open ending: for this is the prelude, the beginning of his young life.

Perhaps this is less antipodean camp than antipodean tragedy. It nevertheless suggests several outcomes. First, in a small population like Australia or New Zealand with a less developed intellectual division of labour than the USA, we do well to learn from others who are not sociologists or do not look like sociologists. This is, I think, a message of universal import. Interesting things can become apparent where the borders are more porous. One disadvantage of working in American sociology, in the heart of the world-system, is to be located exactly in its strength, its number and high degree of specialization. Working in a smaller setting, like the antipodes, means you have to know about more, to explore, to make it up, to improvise. Second, therefore, those who are interested in the history of culture need to be open to the fields of history and cultural studies. The specificity and difference of

history is a kind of natural antidote to the temptation to generality and abstraction in mainstream sociology. Grand claims can be usefully qualified by the outsider's question of 'so wot?' or the complaint, 'not where I come from!' Third, social life is deeply performative, as I have performed for you today, and to use the voices of others in the process – to read, to repeat, to act out – can achieve a sense of profundity alongside, if not beyond interpretation and formal criticism. The mask, and the voice, are powerful – this is the mouse, this is not a mouse, this is us, this is you – this is all of us.

References

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