

# THE PLEBEIANS OF THE WESTERN WORLD?

Australians should be less afraid to embrace their own culture writes  
**Jens Schroeder**

**I**s the following a description of the French working class by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu or an excerpt from a 1960s book on Australian identity?

[I]t is the free speech and language of the heart which make the true 'nice guy,' blunt, straightforward, unbending, honest, genuine, 'straight down the line' and 'straight as a die' as opposed to everything that is pure form, done only for forms sake. It is freedom and the refusal of complications, as opposed to respect for all the forms and formalities spontaneously perceived as instruments of distinction and power ... [F]amiliarity is for some the most absolute form of recognition, the abdication of all distance, a trusting openness, a relation of equal to equal.

If you guessed French working class, you guessed right.<sup>1</sup> But the fact that this text is interchangeable with any of the classic populist accounts of Australian society by social commentators Donald Horne, Craig McGregor, or John Douglas Pringle makes one thing clear: hierarchies of cultural worthiness exist not only within societies but also between nations. As the Swiss banker father of a friend of mine once put it, Europeans consider Australians as the plebeians of the Western world.

'But surely, we are over that, aren't we?' you may wonder. Well, not quite. Only last year, the editor-in-chief of German broadsheet *Die Welt* and former cultural feature writer, Thomas Schmid, presented the well-worn clichés in an editorial.<sup>2</sup> He argued that Australia lacks civilisation, everyone dresses informally, there is a lack of social differentiation, and the only thing that sets the upper class apart from the middle class is its higher income. It is an empty place with nothing in the middle—neither in terms of geography nor in terms of identity.

## Uncouth colonials

Of course, these are prejudices Australians have had to deal with almost since the arrival of the First Fleet, a fate they shared with other New World societies such as the United States. It was assumed that the New World had left the Old World far behind in terms of its progression towards democracy. In cultural terms, however, the Old World remained the standard by which the materialistic, uncouth philistines in the colonies were judged—at least in the eyes of the distinguished, educated (yet instinctively undemocratic) European gentleman.

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Australian academic Dr Elaine Thompson says, 'England, which offered no economic opportunity to the worker, was sentimentalised as the bearer of all things cultural. A deluded belief emerged that there was an inverse relationship between economic success and cultural achievement.'<sup>3</sup> Just as cultural practices are not intrinsic features of each class but obtain legitimacy in opposition to other practices, New World societies were constructed in relation to Old World societies, making Australia an inverse image of many European nations.

European nations were endowed with lengthy histories, dense mythologies, and notions of cultural purity. New World societies, on the other hand, were countries that had to undertake the process of nation formation explicitly, visibly and defensively. It was a rather conscious construction.<sup>4</sup> Australia recognised itself in its mother country. It aimed to leave the old class system and its cultural pretensions behind. Yet a greater democratic conduct somehow made it a land of non-culture while England remained the holy grail for the artist.

One of the most influential accounts in this line of criticism was Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. The aristocratic Frenchman lamented that the United States—the first and worst example of democratic excess—lacked the aristocratic elite that made great art and literature possible. Instead, he found a 'depraved taste for equality which impels the weak to attempt to lower the powerful to their own level.'<sup>5</sup> For de Tocqueville, democracy promoted cultural mediocrity, which led to a materialistic outlook in democratic societies and let the 'taste for the useful predominate over the love of the beautiful in the heart of man.'<sup>6</sup>

In the United States at least, the second half of the nineteenth century saw a reassertion of European sensibilities through a process of monopolisation, legitimisation and sacralisation of aesthetic forms. This meant that borders had to be erected. An elite status group had to find a cultural institution that could claim to serve the community, even as they defined the community to include only the elite and the upper middle classes. Once this monopoly over culture was achieved, the next step was to get other groups to orient themselves towards it and recognise its importance. Therefore, a social distance had to be

achieved between artist and audience to permit the necessary mystification to define a body of artistic work as sacred.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the theatre stopped being a microcosm of the entire spectrum of the population. Shakespeare stopped being popular entertainment, and violent clashes erupted over the anti-English and anti-aristocratic style of his plays. Obviously, the taste for the useful did not always prevail in America, the result being that it gained cultural respectability (of course, without ever losing its crass image completely).

### An Australian identity

In Australia, matters were slightly different. Around the same time that Americans were starting to take culture seriously enough to riot over it, Australia started looking into matters of a distinctive national identity. It found, of course, the bushman, a 'hard case,' sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally.' This national archetype believed that 'Jack is not only as good as his master but, at least in principle, a good deal better ... He will stick to his mates through thick and thin.'<sup>8</sup>

Surely this was a myth, a stereotype that helped conceal crucial currents in Australian history; yet at the same time, the creation of the bushman neatly fitted into the nineteenth century intellectual landscape. It was closely connected to the notion of the 'coming man,' a reaction against the social snobbery the English middle-class exhibited against the colonials and amplified by Australia's foundation population. In contrast to this larger and socially inferior group, the colonial gentry did not regard Australia as 'home' but kept close and respectable connections to England, and therefore left the creation of a distinctive Australian identity to the less powerful but numerous 'lower orders.'

These 'lower orders' saw this identity resting upon 'the man of action, the intelligent "Common Man," the adventurer ready to take up the burden of empire, the ordinary soldier at the outposts of empire, the settler civilising its fringes,'<sup>9</sup> the 'shearers, boundary riders, and general station hands from which comes the one powerful and unique national type produced in Australia.'<sup>10</sup> This democratic, though not necessarily radical, man of action was 'concerned less with good manners than with getting things done.'<sup>11</sup>

The populist figure of the bushman provided a commonsense frame to make sense of one's national culture. It helped answer what was uniquely Australian. However, it was also flawed in several respects: The egalitarianism associated with the national archetype only applied to male workers and excluded women and ethnic minorities. The figure of the bushman concealed the fact that Australia developed as a bourgeois society and that the dominant values were those of a materialistic petit bourgeoisie. It equally concealed that a break with England, similar to the one the United States experienced, never took place in Australia. If a battle for independence took place, it was in the form of the ersatz war of sports. Australian institutions of high culture remained determinedly British and provided fundamental concepts of man and society.

### **An egalitarianism of manners**

How then was the country able to sustain such an influential egalitarian outlook? The ritual of egalitarianism helped shape the new order. It is always what people believe that matters. Yet while the idealism of the bush hardly claimed more than sentimental commitment, Australia's democracy had a real basis. It was an 'egalitarianism of manners.'

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A highly efficient economy, together with a shortage of labour after the discontinuation of the assisted migration scheme, produced high standards of living for male workers. This created an environment in which they became more independent and self-confident. They found dignity and did not have to be humble before their 'betters.' They were ready to think of themselves as more than the 'lower orders'; there was no need for 'improvement.' 'In the Australian cities a working man could be accepted as a respectable citizen.'<sup>12</sup> Compared to Europe, this was an important change of rules. As a German priest put it, the chances of the average educated man ending up in

Africa were higher than him setting foot into the proletarian quarters of Berlin.

In Australia, on the other hand, the manners of public life were direct, open and non-deferential. This made Australian democracy 'first of all a democracy of manners.'<sup>13</sup>

Some people claim that Australian society is not egalitarian because there are wide differences in income ... This misses the point of Australian egalitarianism. It is the way Australians blot out those differences when people meet face to face. They talk to each other as if they are equals and they will put down anyone claiming social superiority. It is the feel of Australian society that is so markedly egalitarian, not its social structure.'<sup>14</sup>

There was no class of degraded paupers; nearly everyone was respectable and hence to be respected. White male workers were self-confident, and there was no great difference in tastes and interests between working men and the rest of the male population. In this egalitarianism lie the deeper reasons for the condescending view of Australia—it devalued the cultural capital of the average European intellectual.

### **Culture and power**

Pierre Bourdieu views culture as a source of domination.

The arts, science, religion, indeed all symbolic systems ... not only shape our understanding of reality and form the basis for human communication; they also help establish and maintain social hierarchies. Culture ... mediates practices by connecting individuals and groups to institutionalised hierarchies.'<sup>15</sup>

He develops this notion into a political economy of power that includes a theory of symbolic interests by extending the logic of economic calculation to all forms of power, whether they are material, cultural, social, or symbolic.

Individuals draw upon a variety of cultural, social, and symbolic resources in order to maintain and enhance their position in the social order. Bourdieu ... conceptualises such resources as capital when they function as 'a social relation of *power*,' that is, when they become objects of struggle as valued resources.<sup>16</sup>

This theory applies especially to high or 'restricted' culture, which functions as elements of social distinction precisely because the instruments to decipher them are not commonly accessible. In contrast to mass culture, its consumption always implies certain competencies. We need to be able to decode a piece of art, the ability of which is conveyed by education. Once we acquire this ability, we are able to talk about 'legitimate' culture in a competent way. This helps social groups to set themselves apart from others that lack these capabilities. Everyone understands mass culture and that it does not serve any form of status. Matters are different, however, with 'restricted' culture; by a conspicuous refusal of other tastes, a class tries to depict its own lifestyle as something superior.

The pieces of art that generate the greatest distinctive power are those that:

Most clearly attest the quality of the appropriation, and therefore to the quality of their owner, because their possession requires time and capacities which, requiring a long investment of time, like pictorial or musical culture, cannot be acquired in haste or by proxy, and which therefore appear as the surest indications of the quality of the person.<sup>17</sup>

As a result, in Europe—and especially in Germany—taste placed individuals and groups with different cultural socialisations within competitive status hierarchies. Cultural distinctions functioned as social distinctions. Aversions to different lifestyles became one of the strongest barriers between the classes. High cultural aesthetics were the basis for the creation of an elite, homogenous in its possession of 'legitimate'

educational credentials. The control of these instruments, allowing the decoding of 'restricted' art, guaranteed access to higher and highest ranks. It was this cultural capital in form of educational credentials, general cultural awareness, and aesthetic preferences that emphasised a claim for social leadership. It virtually made this leadership one's duty.

### **The devaluation of European capital**

Then there was Australia, a country where ordinary people enjoyed 'cultural dignity.' Its outlook was not only shaped by the ritual of egalitarianism but also by the democracy of an egalitarianism of manners. This made bids for social superiority by means of the comprehension of 'restricted' culture unlikely. Claiming to be better than the rest because one could competently talk about art did not suit a society of 'common man.' Tastes were often shared, and there was no single dominant hierarchy of value that related aesthetics and class. Instead, everyone met at the races. This did not mean that art was not appreciated; it meant that the exchange rate of cultural capital into power was less favourable than in Europe.

The 'holy men of culture' and their inimitable nuances of manners and behaviour were confronted by Australia's democracy. This annoyed them to no end. Australia was not only the end of the world but it also became the end of civilisation and of any worthy cultural endeavour.

Of course, a young nation such as Australia could not be as confident about art as European nations. It had a small population and was far removed from the cultural centres of the Western world. That such a society was insecure about its achievements and identity is not surprising. 'It is also understandable that sometimes its insecurity resulted in a lack of discrimination between the good and mediocre and that it sometimes felt threatened by the unusual.'<sup>18</sup> This was also a country where the experience of pioneering in a harsh and alien environment did not leave much room for philosophical deliberations characteristic for Europe.

However, the image of a philistine nation, where nothing else flowed except for milk and honey, was undeserved. There was a more discriminating literary nationalism than that usually identified

with the construction of the Australian Legend, such as the work by Henry Kendall or Charles Harpur.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, there were a variety of cultural achievements in the public sphere. '[A] man reading a book in a Chippendale chair may be as much an Australian as a shearer or a bullock-driver.'<sup>20</sup> Yet this fact was concealed by Australia's populist nationalism and, closely connected, prejudices linked to a different exchange value of cultural capital.

Take the Englishman John Pringle, for example. In his classic *Australian Accent*, he complains about art being just 'part and parcel of the general background of entertainment and recreation' while playing an instrument was regarded as just another 'job.'<sup>21</sup> That was exactly the problem. There was culture in Australia; however, it did not serve a political economy of power as existent in Europe. It was a 'job,' not a claim for superiority. Artists were just like other people, they even lived in suburbia. Accordingly, they and their work had to be inferior.

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### The cringe

Of course, the judging of culture not on its own merits but according to how much capital it could help to accumulate was not restricted to European intellectuals. In contrast to 'ordinary Australians,' the sensibilities of Australian intellectuals—shaped by British influenced institutions of high culture or stays in Europe—were sympathetic to this outlook. After all, it was a promise of social importance as they never had experienced it before. Eventually, this led to the well-known phenomenon of the cultural cringe by which Australian culture was automatically assumed to be at best second rate. 'The damage had been wrought not by the little Aussie battler, the egalitarian, but the people in elite positions, in the museums, universities, government and social elites.'<sup>22</sup>

Essentially, Australia became the victim of an international version of class discrimination.

In Germany, workers often experienced the submission to the cultural values on which the dominant classes based their power as liberating. It was a superficial reaffirmation of the peoples' cultural dignity and helped rebuild their self-esteem. This was their chance to be like the ones up there. However, even if the 'lower orders' tried to improve their social trajectory by investing into cultural capital—reading 'legitimate' literature or listening to 'restricted' music—they often found that the education system was highly discriminatory. The principal institution responsible for the allocation of privilege did not value their habits. They were 'simple' people, they often spoke in an uneducated workers' accent, they lacked general cultural awareness, and they had no educated background. How could these people be able to perceive the subtleties of philosophy? This was a game they could not win.

As pointed out earlier, this did not happen *within* Australia. In a country in which male workers traditionally enjoyed cultural dignity and whose cultural preferences were hardly different to those of the rest of the male population, there was no need for this submission. But it did happen between nations. Just as the Europeans most deprived of 'legitimate' culture were willing to recognise its legitimacy, intellectuals most removed from the centres of 'legitimate' culture widely accepted their critique. Yet as members of the supposed plebeians of the world—democratic yet culturally inferior—they had no chance to ever change this critique's outlook. The results were the same: degradation and self-destructive behaviour as the consequence of the borders erected by aesthetic hierarchies; only this time, they were international instead of intra-social.

It is no coincidence that there exists a deeper gulf between mainstream Australia and the cognitive elite of the intelligentsia than exists in other Western countries. The mainstream Australian was content with egalitarianism being a fundamental part of his identity. For him this was a value in itself. He enjoyed art and appreciated knowledge, but he did not automatically associate it with social superiority. Intellectuals, especially after the 1970s, saw a denied chance and a miserable conversion rate. As a result, the guilt-driven, university-educated cultural gatekeepers

of the left celebrated an updated version of the cringe in their criticism of all things Australian.

### **Culture and democracy**

Australia should not pay attention to the knockers. Offended European capital and the cringe stand in the way of a recognition of its achievements. It should celebrate them more self-consciously, be they culturally, socially or economic. It survived the global crisis relatively unscathed. It is a young, vibrant nation in a booming part of the world. It has more to offer than the beach, the beer and (the alleged) crassness. It also has to deal with the pretensions that turn tastes and associated capital into means of power. Take Keating's art programs, for example— albeit this happens on a smaller scale than in Europe. Australia enjoys culture and democracy in more equal parts than Europe. In short, it has every reason to be taken seriously, especially by a tired Europe that increasingly loses meaning on the world stage and faces almost insuperable demographic problems.

It would be desirable if Australia found the confidence to display this part of itself more often. Where the bloody hell are you? At the museum *and* the pub.

### **Endnotes**

- 1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (New York, London: Routledge, 1984).
- 2 Thomas Schmid, 'Besuch aus Melbourne,' *Welt am Sonntag* (30 August 2009).
- 3 Elaine Thompson, *Fair Enough: Egalitarianism in Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, (1994), 185.
- 4 Graeme Turner, *Making it National: Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 122–123.
- 5 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. II, cited by Elaine Thompson, as above, 234.
- 6 As above.
- 7 Paul DiMaggio's quote can be found in Rainer Diaz-Bone, *Kulturwelt, Diskurs und Lebensstil. Eine diskurstheoretische Erweiterung der bourdieuschen Distinktionstheorie*, (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 2002), 153.)
- 8 Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1966), 1–2.
- 9 Richard White, *Inventing Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 78.
- 10 Francis Adams, cited by Gerald Alfred Wilkes, *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn* (Melbourne: Edward Arnold, 1981), 34.
- 11 Richard White, as above, 78.
- 12 John Hirst, *Australia's Democracy: A Short History* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2002), 264.
- 13 As above, 303.
- 14 As above.
- 15 David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1.
- 16 As above, 73–74 (emphasis in original).
- 17 As above, 281.
- 18 Elaine Thompson, as above, 235.
- 19 Gerald Alfred Wilkes, as above, 58.
- 20 As above, 49.
- 21 John Douglas Pringle, *Australian Accent* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), 135.
- 22 Elaine Thompson, as above, 237.