

REVIEWS

Cultural Liberalism in Australia: A study in intellectual and cultural history

George Melluish
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Over the past ten or so years, there has been a substantial turning of the historiographical tide as it has been recognized that Australia has an intellectual history worth pursuing. Gregory Melluish has made a number of contributions to that process, and now, in this book, offers not only a case for the significance of liberal thinking, but also a substantial reinterpretation of the Australian liberal tradition. He is concerned to rescue and to explain "cultural liberalism". In part he wants to insist on a cultural history apart from the more conventional political analyses of, say Deakinite/ameliorative versus "free-trade" liberal philosophy. But more importantly, he wants to analyze the ideas of those who were first shaped by a university education. They shared a commitment to "culture" and to common values, and a belief in individual autonomy, but allied to a view of rational progress that led to them striving for an "harmonious whole" rather than endorsing *laissez-faire* principles. The universalism of their ideals made them exemplars of modernism, and Melluish intends his book to be a study in the rise and fall of Australian modernism.

Melluish's argument has four components. First, he explores the passing of Australian modernism and of the cultural traditions (pre-eminent among

them, cultural liberalism) which formed it. Second, he attempts to demolish any lingering vestiges of the radical nationalist influence on historiography. Third, he makes a strong case for the agency of a liberal intelligentsia in shaping modern Australia. Fourth, he ascribes the downfall of cultural liberalism to a "progressive" civic humanism that made its adherents prey to the mythology of a reformist state, and hence unsuited to the more complex world of contingency, risk, individual autonomy and personal responsibility demanded in the post-modern era.

How successful are these arguments? It is certainly the case that the modernist project, at least as understood between the 1890s and the mid twentieth century, has waned. The universalising and progressive assumptions of that time - which Melliush frames in terms of cultural liberalism - are under siege. Whether this is because they were always "incorrect" and inevitably to be supplanted (as Melliush implies) by a superior form of liberalism, more attuned to individual autonomy, rational choice and personal agency rather than state protection, is another question. Melliush, who clearly sees himself as a post modernist on these matters, ignores the strictures of those (like Anthony Giddens) who warn of the political/social blindness of post modernism in the face of the continued economic universalization of high modernism (the creation of a "single world" where before there was none). Post modernists celebrate "difference" while the opportunities for autonomy are being whittled away. Melliush's reluctance to connect his liberalism with this debate is a signal of the parochialism of his approach: it is essential that we recover the specificities of Australian liberalism, but also that we locate these appropriately within debates that go beyond Australia. (Oakeshott is not the end of the story).

Melliush's critique of radical nationalism puts a new spin on the argument that it failed to accommodate the liberal mainstream in Australian political and cultural life. He is right on this, and his argument is worth pursuing here. Others have made this point, but few with the detail Melliush invests in the discussion. That said Melliush stands on the shoulders of others who pioneered the exploration of liberal thought in Australia. He acknowledges some of the most important of these - Roe, Rowse and Macintyre in particular. But he is rarely generous to his forerunners: Rowse especially is lambasted for ideological bias and the substantial contribution his work made in its time is thus obscured; Macintyre's foundational recovery of nineteenth century liberalism is scantily treated; Rickard, Tiver and Hirst are largely ignored. Perhaps the most surprising omission is any reference to the late 19th and 20th century feminist progressives - brought back to our attention

over the past decade and more by Marilyn Lake, Judith Allen, and others - and whose works fit precisely within the dynamic of cultural liberalism as Melluish describes it. Thus, despite its rejection of modernism, the book is curiously out of step with post modernism, in which feminist perspectives have been central.

Where Melluish combines the detailed discussion of texts with analysis of how these constitute a conversation on varieties of liberalism, idealism, realism and social policy, the book works well. The central chapters (3-6) are worth persevering with for this immersion in inter war modes of thinking about the world. But it does take perseverance since all too often exposition lapses into endless synopsis, and often in prose less felicitous than the original (see Hancock, for instance).

Perhaps the most important contribution Melluish makes is in rescuing the intelligentsia from the charge that it was simply secondary and derivative (he presents a powerful case concerning the integrity of Australian intellectual debates), or that it was no more than the voice of economic elites (against Richard White, he demonstrates the autonomy of this group and its capacity to pursue its own interests). Building on Roe, he shows us both the formal institutional links - particularly through the emerging universities - and the informal networks that sustained the 'conversation' about cultural liberalism. In this, too, there are precursors - Jordan's *Stenhouse Circle*, Docker's *Australian Cultural Elites*, Macintyre's *Colonial Liberalism*, Walker's *Dream and Disillusion*, and a string of important intellectual biographies, such as Allen's *Rose Scott*, Osmond's *Frederic Eggleston*, and Macintyre's *Ernest Scott*. But Melluish provides a substantial addition to the mosaic, and one shaped by an awareness of the sociological formation of the intelligentsia. This is a useful contribution both to understanding the nature of intellectual work within, and the occupational and class segmentation of, Australian society.

Melluish is acute in showing us that cultural liberalism was a product of a particular time and context. He is less insightful in seeing that the form of liberalism that succeeded it, and which he endorses, dominates not because it is superior, but because it is one that is the product of these times. This is a tendentious and provoking book, but it must be argued with by all those interested in Australia's cultural, political and intellectual heritage.

