

Introduction: Key Thinkers and Their Contemporary Legacy

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This special issue of *Humanities Research* journal draws on a selection of papers from The Australian National University's 'Key Thinkers' lecture series, which I convened in 2008 and 2009 under the aegis of the Research School of Humanities. As a postgraduate at the University of Sydney in the early 2000s, I had the pleasure of hearing Ghassan Hage give an inspirational lecture on the acclaimed French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu as a contribution to their successful Key Thinkers lecture series, which was popular with the general public. In his leisurely, explorative and amiably digressive style—replete with anecdotes from recent field trips to Lebanon and Venezuela—Hage brilliantly evoked Bourdieu as a critical thinker and public intellectual, illuminating the personal investments and emancipative politics of a thinker who has been overshadowed by the more luminous representatives of French high theory. That Hage had recently given a powerful exposition of the applicability of Bourdieu's concepts to the reassertion of a white Australian nationalist imaginary (*White Nation: Fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society*, 1998) gave his dynamic talk a real frisson of contemporary significance—a sense that we, his audience, were witnessing a living dialogue between two transformative social theorists.¹

Not long after arriving at The Australian National University as an Australian Research Council postdoctoral fellow in 2006, and eager to contribute to the venerable research culture of the Humanities Research Centre and the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, where I was then situated, I began to think about convening a Key Thinkers series that would utilise the interdisciplinary strengths of the College of Arts and Social Science as well as the many domestic and overseas visitors who enrich intellectual life at The Australian National University. The ANU Key Thinkers series began in April 2008. The brief I gave to speakers was to evoke the continuing significance and critical legacy of an important thinker; to give, as Edward Said demanded in *Representations of the Intellectual*, a textured evocation of the 'image, the signature, the actual intervention and performance, all of which taken together constitute the very

¹ Hage, Ghassan 1998, *White Nation: Fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural society*, Pluto Press, Sydney.

lifeblood of every real intellectual'.² I encouraged speakers to de-familiarise a received image of a contemporary thinker's stock ideas, all of which Hage had done so admirably that memorable evening.

In the two and a half years since the series began, speakers have responded dynamically to its premise. The series began fittingly with Geremie Barmé and Gloria Davies addressing the exemplary status and posthumous legacies of Mao Zedong and Lu Xun in China—a topical theme after the Mandarin-speaking Kevin Rudd's ascension to the prime ministership in late 2007. Indicating that much more than admiration was at stake in the evocation of a key thinker, in a lecture of October 2008 Ian Higgins analysed the 'political extremism' of Jonathan Swift's 'insurgent Irish polemic and satire', and contested, via an analysis of Swift's emphasis on religious confession, the conventionally secular account of Swift as a political thinker and writer. Debjani Ganguly restored to us a sense of Gandhi as a sometimes self-ironic activist intellectual, a self-styled 'inconsistent' thinker who endorsed Emerson's observation that 'foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds'. Her lecture evoked the many personae of the Mahatma, analysing the globally minded, cosmopolitan Gandhi and the indigenous intellectual who imaginatively deployed an Indian ethical vernacular (*Ahimsa, Satyagraha*). She evoked Gandhi as a moral icon simultaneously relevant and irrelevant to late-modern India, important to India's intellectual life and popular culture, but regrettably peripheral to the domain of national politics.

In bringing together the papers for this issue of *Humanities Research*, I was mindful—like Debjani and the other speakers mentioned—of the contradictory and unresolved legacy of important figures of emancipative and humanist thought. I was also interested in the unstable combination of ethical universalism and Euro-centric parochialism that continues to generate fascination and disquiet with the 'Enlightenment project' and its aftermath. In particular, Cook's and Curthoys' essays contribute to a continuing historiographical discussion that pluralises our sense of the rhetorical inventiveness and suasive agility of Enlightenment discourse while acknowledging the imaginative limitations of particular thinkers. Like Debjani, the contributors to this issue are interested in the discursive innovations and mode of address of their chosen thinkers. In the lead essay, 'Volney and the science of morality in revolutionary France', Alexander Cook brings to life a now obscure figure, the French polymath Constantin François Volney (1757–1820). While not an important thinker in the accepted sense of the term, Volney, Cook argues, was a key thinker of the French Revolution, one of its most widely read intellectual exports, who can provide us with a 'key for unlocking, or understanding, issues in the intellectual and cultural history of his era'. Cook argues suggestively for Volney's significance in

2 Said, Edward 1994, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, Vintage, London, p. 10.

‘transmitting a kind of vogue for ruin literature and a literary genre of secular prophecy to early nineteenth-century Europe’. Volney’s vibrant political discourse captured a popular mood and influenced a range of social movements. As Cook argues, Volney’s significance far exceeds Marx and Engels’ dismissive caricature of him as a bourgeois French materialist. Cook explains that Volney’s most influential work, *The Ruins*, was not a paradigm-creating philosophical exposition; it was, rather, ‘rhetorical, poetic, pragmatic, and political in intent’, which ‘enhanced its contemporary power but contributed to its long-term neglect’.

Ann Curthoys’ essay, ‘Mary Wollstonecraft revisited’, is also a reception-oriented reading of a key thinker and her contested intellectual and political legacy. Curthoys evokes Wollstonecraft (1759–97) as a constant guide in her own story of feminist activism, which included the founding of women’s studies as an academic discipline in Australia. Wollstonecraft, Curthoys writes, appealed to a 1970s feminist interest in ‘interdisciplinary approaches to large questions’, impressing motivated readers as the first to insist that ‘women’s subordination was a social product’. Similarly, in the experimental and liminal moment of 1970s feminism, Wollstonecraft’s life demonstrated a ‘free spirit, and an unconventionality, that most of us admire and aspire to’. Commentary on Wollstonecraft must start with her life, Curthoys suggests, invoking ‘biography, anecdote, vignette and social genealogy’. Like Cook, Curthoys is interested in the rhetorical strategies of Wollstonecraft, the interdependence of her reformist energy with a reductive figuration of the Orientalised Other. Curthoys’ essay is a nuanced contribution to a recent school of interpretation that situates Wollstonecraft as a leading proponent of ‘feminist Orientalism’. Citing contemporary instances of feminist discussions of Islam, Curthoys asks herself and her audience how contemporary feminism can articulate its concerns without ‘participating in the use of feminism as a strategy for Western domination’.

John Docker explores the ecumenical interests and complex commitments of the Polish-Jewish jurist Raphaël Lemkin (1900–59), who coined the term ‘genocide’ later enshrined in the 1948 UN Genocide Convention. Docker argues that Lemkin’s life and work are evidence that ‘historical reflection should also include an element that is extremely personal’. He evokes Lemkin as a world historical thinker with an ‘Andalusian sensibility’, who, ‘inspired by eccentricity, a personal vision and a synthetic imagination’, brought to world history a new concept and comparative perspective, transforming how we perceive the human condition and human history. Docker suggests that because Lemkin, a cosmopolitan émigré scholar, interpreted genocide as multifaceted, encompassing both destructive acts and longer-term processes such as settler colonialism, his ‘discursive definition of genocide’ is just as important as the

codified definition of the 1948 convention. Yet, as Docker points out, Lemkin did not remain faithful to his own protean conception of genocide, demeaning his own reputation by lending his authority as a genocide expert to 'help maintain the South in its white supremacism'. One of 'modern history's most interesting and creative thinkers', Docker argues, has thereby left us a 'productive if always contested concept'.

In 'Thinking with Stanner in the present', Melinda Hinkson addresses renewed interest in the work of the Australian anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner (1905–81). Hinkson is interested in the way Stanner's anthropological writings are currently being mobilised in public political debates about the future of Aboriginal culture. Yet Hinkson is cautious about instrumentalist readings of Stanner's work that mine his ethnographic gaze for political purposes. She highlights the reflexivity and cognitive modesty of Stanner's own writing on Aboriginal people. Hinkson cites Stanner's famous essay 'Durmugan: a Nangiomeri', which, she argues, was not written for the purposes of policy prescription but to give a sense of the lived experience of cultural contact through an individual biography. By passionately and evocatively conveying a 'conception of identity in the process of transformation', Stanner, Hinkson writes, defied the orthodoxies of his discipline and proved himself a uniquely powerful essayist. Nevertheless, as with Lemkin's personal vision, it is the rich texture and 'humanist quality' of Stanner's mode of 'life writing'—an approach foreign to the structural-functionalist methodology that he inherited—which leaves his work so open to divergent interpretations. For Stanner was not simply objectifying Aboriginal people but attempting to understand the ways in which, in the aftermath of colonisation, Aboriginal culture was taking forms that 'our own epistemological frameworks' are not yet able to grasp.

The final essay, from Fiona Jenkins, 'Judith Butler: disturbance, provocation and the ethics of non-violence', is also concerned with an influential contemporary thinker, Judith Butler (1956–), who wishes to dwell in the temporal flux of 'trouble', in doubt, uncertainty and ethical dilemma. Investigating Butler's ethical and political commitments over several decades, Jenkins argues that they have been shaped by challenging exclusionary articulations of which bodies matter, and which, conversely, are dematerialised and open to violence. Confronted and disturbed by the normative questions posed by the enigmatic cover to Judith Butler's famous early work *Gender Trouble*, Jenkins converses with Butler's thought to elaborate an account of 'apprehension' as an ethical mode in which a disturbing image is encountered but not yet recognised, its 'force-field' of claims registered so as to admit 'forms of disturbance that are productive and creative'. Jenkins argues that Butler's well-known articulation of the need for a 'performative reconfiguring' of gender norms is consonant with the description of non-violent response in her more recent work. Butler

offers a way of thinking about the ‘potentials opened by the experience of being disturbed’, which includes ‘accepting one’s relational dependence’ and vulnerability before the other—a vulnerability that enables an open-endedness of encounter and a futural passage into ‘unknowing’. Butler advocates a humanist ethos of temporal receptivity recognisable in all the key thinkers discussed in this volume—that is, a willingness to ‘allow the human to become something other than what it is traditionally assumed to be’. My hope is that this collection suggests that the thought and legacy of important thinkers of the modern era are always something more than they are assumed to be, exhibiting a relational dependence on interpretative interlocutors and openness to the future that will continue to stimulate productive debate.

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