

Is Australia part of Asia?

Talk presented to staff of Museum of Victoria circa 1995. This was a "soapbox seminar" organised to get the staff thinking about how "Australian Identity" would be depicted in the new Melbourne Museum which opened five years later.

Dr. Michael Cathcart and Dr. David Tacey also spoke.

Thank you Doctors Cathcart and Tacey for your most (insert appropriate adjective) and (ditto) contributions.

I have been advised that the purpose of these seminars is to provoke thought on how the new museum might present itself in terms of cultural identity. In particular I have been asked to speak on the topic of Australia's relationship with the rest of Asia and the effect that might have on our identity.

What I would like to do, by examining some textual matters and discussing some personal ones, offer a few personal thoughts on what may reasonably be described as the consequences, with regard to our national and cultural identity, of us occupying this point on the face of the Earth at this particular stage of history.

A rather grandiose theme, but I should point out that this emphasis on the personal is a new age way of saying that not one skerrick of academic rigour or systematic research has gone into these views. But then there're a lot of people who operate like that, so perhaps I can pass myself off as their representative.

Nevertheless I think it appropriate, at the outset, to define myself and the breadth of experience from which I speak. I lived in Japan for two and a half years. I began translating about ten years ago. For the past five years translation has been my primary occupation. I am a very occasional user of the museum, an Australian citizen and Ros Poole's son. If that isn't license to provoke then I don't know what is.

For several years there has been a tendency to re-examine the expectations we have of Australia, in the light of our proximity to certain countries that are part of what is known as "Asia". This examination has been accompanied by a feeling of embarrassment and/or self congratulation that we've taken so long to realise, but are now finally doing, what is the rational thing to do, as should be obvious to all. The little rosette on the top of all this flummery is the expression "Australia is part of Asia."

Being a linguist I'm quite proud to be called a pedant. So I take as my point of departure this phrase and examine it.

Some may say that it is poor sport to pick on such a bite-sized slogan, that it is in fact just media shorthand for far more evolved and respectable opinions. But ideas in the area of policy don't get houseroom unless a body of popular interest can be whipped up and it is only with such grossly simplified and emotive

utterances that the majority of public opinion is mobilised. I don't think we can under-estimate the power in these things.

I've worked in the field of translation for long enough to have seen the terrible potential for the inaccurate use of language or the failure to appreciate subtle nuance, to thwart the smooth progress of justice and business, to conceal responsibility and to lead parties well astray from the matters at hand. And of course being a citizen of Australia I've seen the same principle pro-actively applied as a form of government. I most definitely have a problem with this phrase.

What is Asia? It is a word coined by sixteenth century Europeans to refer to everything from the Bosphorus to the Bering Straits, and from the Arctic to the Molluccas. The 1960 EB grudgingly admits Japan and Indonesia.

Taxonomists in the audience must acknowledge that the progress of civilisation, if not actually driven, then has been accompanied by the ever more refined application of descriptive terms and analytic processes to the world around us yet here we are suggesting that we refine our self image by burying it in the largest land mass on Earth.

This is being petty surely. What these people mean are the cultures of the ethnic groups that occupy that land mass. This is even less helpful. They include such disparate peoples as Muslim Malaysia, the Kingdom of Thailand, Communist China, Japan and India. That Europeans several hundred years ago saw fit to lump all these diverse cultures together with the only unifying element being that they were not European does not help me as I try to understand just who in the contemporary world could benefit from such crudely-wrought geographical demarcations.

Let's try to be even more specific. In order to avoid being seen as racists or snobs, those who like the idea of us being part of Asia, the Bob Hawkes with their "Asia-literate" and Keating with his..whatever, will happily say "Yes of course we mean North Korea and Bangladesh as well", but if not pressed in this way I think the countries they really mean are the ones sometimes called the Asian dragons: Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia.

This little cluster starts to look consistent. We've narrowed it down to three or four ethnic groups and I think Confucianism may be a common thread running between them. Still, perhaps we should take a leaf out of the book of Asian politeness and politely ask them:

A. whether the concept of "Asia" plays a significant part in their day-to-day self-image?

B. Do they consider themselves part of it? And

C. Would they like us to be part of it?

I've asked these things. Just the thought of the answer makes me sorry I've spent so much time on the topic at all.

And what of the phrase "to be part of"? Croatia and Serbia are both part of Europe, East Timor is part of Indonesia, Brisbane and Hobart are both part of Australia and yet it costs more to send a container of manufactured goods from one to the other than it does from either one to Osaka.

If there is anyone left who thinks, after reflecting on these things, that being "part" of something guarantees the slightest benefit whether of trade or goodwill, they must have miso for brains.

The overall trend of looking towards Asia as we redefine our national identity is accompanied by a questioning of the significance of our connection with Europe. You only have to be a half-hearted consumer of the media to spot the occasional guilt or embarrassment that accompanies the thought that we've spent too long looking to Europe for guidance. I use the word "Europe" as opposed to "Britain" because I think that it is more accurate to describe Australia as the product of Western European civilisation. Anyway, I'm not happy about joining in this guilt thing. If we've committed a crime, then this smacks of donning another identity in order to leave the scene of it.

A Japanese chap the other day said to me that China was the mother of Japan and Korea the father, even though most Japanese wouldn't admit the latter. I thought it was interesting that the same Freudian drama has been played out in our world as well. England is our mother and France our father but our parents separated when we were very young and our mother spent the subsequent years brainwashing us that our father was an evil man - a line that, to our shame, many Australians seem to have bought.

I have lived briefly in both England and France. It came as quite a shock. I felt at home in both countries. Apart from the well known, historical matters of democracy, the metric system, income tax, national service and so on that all stem from the French revolution and that we take for granted, I actually saw things like a duck on every pond and a pond in every village, like the books I had when I was a kid. I saw 'beanpoles' for the first time after being called one when I was skinny. This sort of vernacular cultural resonance lined the streets over there.

The inescapable conclusion for me was that we Australians are part of, a branch of European culture. That what we have in Australia is not just a distant product

of that culture, but that it is the live and tingling extremity of a very robust branch of Western civilisation.

There are people I know who are uncomfortable with this thought but their handy, unannounced recourse to geographical distance in the middle of the conversation, in the hope that it diminishes the association with a particular culture, is ingenious.

Culture is like, totally portable. If two Australian astronauts were orbiting Mars at this moment and one said to the other "You had no right to eat that last Astro Tim Tam," then in that instant the two of them would constitute a perfectly formed and functioning little bubble of Western European culture. The reference to individual rights, the tendency to confront, the indignation. These are all our cultural heritage, they are all characteristic of the people who have inhabited Europe for the past several centuries.

As an Australian I am perfectly happy with the thought that I am an inheritor of and part of European culture and that, furthermore, nothing will ever happen on this continent to render European culture less than central to the identity of my own country, in much the same way that Europeans are comfortable with the fact that the basis of their culture can be traced back to ancient Rome, Greece and Palestine.

So, aside from the question of how it will serve the process of defining an Australian identity, I disagree with active down-playing of our European heritage simply because it is wrong. Nevertheless by being here, and now, there must be consequences and I think they are very interesting.

I have to confess to have been a beneficiary in this way in that I happened to go to Japan with Rotary and such a scheme is in place because of the perception on both sides of the Pacific that because we are trading so much then we ought to promote mutual understanding. I can't disagree with the basic premise and it has been good for me.

However, the fact that I and about five other people in Melbourne can earn a living more financially-rewarding than carpentry by being a translator is an anomalous situation. Simply a function of the respective stages of the economic development of our two countries and the lack of a Japanese speaking community in Australia.

This won't last either. The people who determine our education policies lend their well-intentioned shoulders to the slow overturning of the traditional languages taught in secondary schools; French, German, even Latin and Greek. This is accompanied by a contrived amazement that we should still be troubling ourselves with the languages of some far-off continent when we're right here in another part of the world. Another quick call on geography to make a case about something that weighs nothing.

This amazement conceals a genuine lack of understanding of the purpose of language education. They are effecting in one stroke a conversion from learning about where we came from, to learning about where a minority of us think we ought to be going. Language skills are now seen as an adjunct to trading success. A glance at the economic success of the notoriously monolingual Americans, or the Arabs for that matter, ought to qualify that hope.

By discarding the European languages in favour of teaching Asian languages, by severing access to the pool of languages from which ours has sprung, I believe that we are doing the greatest damage to the means by which people all over the world have traditionally answered the question "who am I?".

To me this is not a sound basis on which to found an approach to any sort of education, let alone language. A friend of mine, a Japanese-born lecturer in Japanese at Melbourne University, bemoans the near impossibility of teaching Japanese grammar to Australian students because they don't know what grammar is per se, because they've never been taught English grammar. It seems that while rummaging through Asia for a paradigm of literacy we strolled right past Japan and lit upon 18th century Mongolia.

What is the purpose of language education? I would love my kids to learn at least one other language. There are many reasons, the primary one being that if a person can prosecute all the aims and aspirations common to humans using an entirely different set of noises, that is the sharpest way of revealing the factual and logical content that lies beneath the phonetic surface of one's mother tongue. These things exist independently from language itself but this independence is not apparent until viewed through the lens of another. Above all, I would have my children habitually examine language for that content. It is surely the inability to do this that underpins the sage nods that greet such unmitigated claptrap as the suggestion that "Australia is part of Asia".

Perhaps I should return to the theme. The situation in Australia is not so much a question of what are the consequences of proximity - this might have been an interesting question before the invention of the internal combustion engine, the radio and the fax, but as conduits of cultural exchange even these things pale next to language.

I think it is not just a question of what the consequences of our being here and now are but how they should be described. This isn't just playing with words. Language and culture are intimately linked together. Millions of people every day behave in culturally determined ways and if challenged will respond with words that they have never examined beyond establishing that "that's why everyone else says we do it." In this way culture propels from within the hermetic environment of language. We ought to take a great deal of care, in this time of rampant introspection when we construct descriptions of what and why we do things so that time and resources are not wasted in demonstrating their ultimate

vacuity. This might be a good example..

One of the things that make it difficult to see the effect on Australia's cultural identity of our proximity to the various countries traditionally called Asia is multiculturalism. This is a paradox, the foundations of which we have inherited from European culture.

I'm actually not sure what multiculturalism means. It's an "ism" so it either expresses a state or a quality, or a system or a principle. But whatever it means, I think it oversteps the mark to suggest that our culture is being significantly modified as a result of contact with others.

I remain very sceptical that this sort of thing takes place anywhere in the world - that the people of any culture will accept other cultures. I think we choose aspects of other cultures and incorporate them into our own. In our case the criterion of choice will be a naked cultural construct of Western civilisation. We then use language to dress up our selectivity by labelling those parts of other cultures that we reject, as cruel, stupid, distasteful or criminal but on universal, not cultural grounds. Be they cockfights, genital mutilation, eating whales, shitting in the streets, paying bribes, subjugating women, or most insidious and offensive of all, working harder than us, for less money.

We generally refuse to identify these things as parts of foreign cultures at all and denounce them as crimes against all humanity or against just plain common sense, as though it were obvious to everyone but an imbecile or barbarian.

To appoint ourselves arbiters of what is or isn't a cultural matter - and therefore a sacred thing - or matters for judgment is, in its turn, cultural imperialism.

What we have in Australia isn't a bad alternative considering the planet we're on. We decorate our country with pieces of other cultures and that's as far as it goes. The next time a party of adventurous cosmopolites are returning home from Victoria Street [little Vietnam] enthusing about the broken rice, fried egg and pate, they might take a moment to reflect that the Vietnamese eat Vietnamese food every day and don't get sick of it. Their cultural identity unconsciously determines that they eat their own food. Ours determines that we self-consciously eat everyone else's. This is a cultural marker itself. It is impertinent, even imperialistic, to expect the people of other cultures to do the same, or even assist us.

To examine these matters one must have a definition in mind for the word "identity". Mine is: the picture of yourself that you see in several imagined, possible futures. The ability to imagine several possible futures is a definitive human trait. It allows us to choose one to work towards before we've expended any resources. A vision for the future is very useful but you must be able to see yourself in it.

I've been told that when I speak Japanese I have a different personality. That I

bow and say things that if translated back into English sound absurdly polite or deferential. People have found this a bit sus and wonder whether this switching in and out of true-blue blokedom so easily means that it is all an act and that maybe there isn't a genuine person beneath the mannerisms.

I should report here, that isn't the case. I have a perfectly functional identity. I think however that I've been very fortunate in being able to acquire a familiarity with the vocabulary of another culture as well as that of another language. And in the same way that language gives a new vantage point from which you can triangulate and see for the first time the universality of meaning as distinct from words, then so perhaps I've been lucky to see that there is more culture than food and more to identity than the way you hold you head.

I think the task that lies ahead for Australia is very difficult. We've been happy enough to believe that culture can be summed up in a restaurant and a street festival. This sort of thinking has led to various mistakes like the grave one of thinking that the Japanese are "Westernised" because they wear suits and eat McDonald's. In our examination of this culture and that one and our asking what is happening to them, when the only data that appears in our language deals with the superficiality of culture, this is a serious handicap. It will confound our efforts, and require major rethinking.

Because of those who have found territory to defend in established linguistic conventions, unable to distinguish between words and ideas, such rethinking will involve actual battles of words. But progress will not be made in this debate until we can wrap our pens around that unrelinquished kernel within each of us that appears in our imagined possible futures without reference to the flags and dishes of all nations. And maybe we could call it identity.

I know it will take much more work and more than one generation to come up with a description of our cultural identity that is elegant, Austrocentric and that will stand up to critical scrutiny. But to imagine that anyone remotely connected with the political process has done this work for us and that their pronouncements may serve in this capacity is about as brainy as believing that it was democracy and not petrol pumps being defended in Kuwait.

I have an interest in the gradual definition of cultural identity on an individual, community and national level. Simply because I'm a human and in the context of uncountable other humans, all of whom have ways of being that are culturally determined, I need to be able to see myself, my family, my community and my country in more than one possible future and do what I can to steer them towards the more desirable of those futures.

An identity is the prerequisite to all of this and it seems to me that Australia could do a bit more analysis of our relationship with Europe and try to grasp, try to live with, the big difference between a historical connection and a contemporary one. As I said, I can't see any way of describing our culture in

Australia as other than an offshoot of European culture, but I don't find it at all incompatible with the sentiment that we are Australians, and if the simple fact of us living and dying here doesn't already make it the most important place on Earth then what improvements remain to be made are the home-grown responsibility of us alone. We might get started as soon as we stop insulting the Europeans by ignoring history and stop sucking up to the Asians on the flimsy pretext of geography.

The question of how these issues ought to influence the development of an identity for the new museum I happily consign to the judgement of your good selves but if we live in a melting pot, then I simply hope that this very important institution can tell the froth from the bones.

Well, there you have my poorly curated thoughts. I ought to inform you that to make Happy Hour even more lively I actually included several deliberate mistakes in my talk and I will be awarding a portrait of Prince Charles to the person who can point them all out to me, while I do my bit to encourage the development of a distinct Australian cultural identity by having a beer.

Thank you.