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Culture, Take Two: Big C and Little C

I was honoured to be invited to write for *Prace Kulturoznawcze*. It gave me the opportunity, after a thirty year career in cultural and historical sociology, to look back and to think forward. In 2014 I retired from La Trobe Sociology, which in its time had been legendary in the breadth and richness of its culture. In 2015 I was offered a research post in Cultural Studies at Curtin University in Perth, on the other side of the continent. Different place, different climate, different history: different culture (see *Thesis Eleven*, 135, 2016). The convention at Curtin is for professors to self-appellate, not after heroes but in terms of fields. My first enthusiasm, for Culture and Technology, was already taken, marked out by the late Niall Lucy. I decided finally on Culture and Society, as a nod to Raymond Williams, but more to insist on the openness or expanse of my brief. I was pleased by the opportunity to work with new people in a new place, one whose culture I already respected. The areas of strength, for me at Curtin, are in cities and creative writing, the first an old love, the second a new curiosity for me. Starting over was like leaving home again, only I was no longer eighteen.

So the invitation to write arrived, and I began to think about it in South Africa — a wonderful place to think and to think anew. Looking back, thinking forward, I decided so to say to settle accounts with Williams, with Alexander and with Bauman, three of my lifelong interlocutors. The triptych was a device for a thought experiment. It seemed like a good moment for me to contemplate the idea of culture and its career. Although my paper begins with various instances of culture with a Little C, events or phenomena of the lifeworld, the approach I took was more like Big C; three frames, big picture, big thinkers. So my approach was formal, if you like, but open — three frames, take your pick, or travel on to the next sideshow. The intention of my paper is experimental and personal — it is not a manifesto, so much as a thinking together with some of the greater minds that have influenced me. My choice of the subject matter was also influenced by the educated guess that as an antipodean — one with a leg each on my continent and one in Europe — my voice would carry further, into Poland, if I did not talk

about Australia, which is more likely in this context a signifier without a signified. Australian scholars learn very early on that our place is invisible in most other parts. ‘Austria?’

Being antipodean, in fact, can mean being invisible in two places; you need to step out, into the bigger world, which takes you off the local radar. And you need to stay home, write about home, which makes your work even less visible to outsiders. Alan Davies called this “small country blues”; likely its tunes will be familiar to other ears. So in my local voice, I would likely speak less of say Bauman, and more with Bernard Smith, the most inspiring antipodean thinker, whose contribution I have scanned in *Imagining the Antipodes — Theory, Culture and the Visual in the Work of Bernard Smith* (1997). Or I might examine the political culture of labourism, as I did in *Transforming Labor* (1994), or subject Australia to the prisms of place, time and division, as we did in *Australian Sociology* (2007) or in *Thinking the Antipodes* (2015). Or I might begin, as I have with Sian Supski, to seek to make sense of South Africa and its cultures — a steep learning curve, the kind that challenges self-understanding as well as the capacity to learn (see *Thesis Eleven*, 136, 2016).

Ślawomir Magala seems to accuse me of taking the linguistic turn too seriously. Maybe. Should we be sceptical of the linguistic turn? Absolutely; this and everything else. When I was working in Stellenbosch I emailed my friends, away, to tell them Stellenbosch was on fire. No metaphor! There is a world outside language! The streets were on fire, as students and unionists struck up a fascinating alliance against the authorities and the regime. Though it also becomes apparent that in a place like South Africa, language is of paramount political significance, not least but not only with reference to Afrikaans. Magala suggests that my proposals are too narrowly academic. I do not see them as proposals, and where I come from academic is, or can be an insult. Academics are institutional creatures; I want us to be intellectuals, which does however mean that we use names and symbols as markers of how we are thinking, or where we have come from. Should we step outside of the seminar room? Absolutely, for that is where the Culture of Little C operates, in the streets, at home, in work, in politics, in everyday life, love and hate. (In South Africa, even the seminar room can be volatile.)

If Magala makes too little of my work (for what it is worth), Dominik Bartmański, I think, makes too much of it. His is a Bauman-like generosity, seeking to add more interlocutors, further sociologists and anthropologists into the conversation. This is a good idea, although many such practitioners in my experience fail to problematise, compare, deal sufficiently with matters of time and place. Some of the smartest people will be beyond the borders, whether national or professional. One of the good things about living in a small, or distant country like Australia is that you have to get out. Is society a book? No; and this is a good corrective, for sometimes the prosthetic takes the place of the object under examination. Do the senses matter? Absolutely; how many sociologists have written

about smell? (How many anthropologists get outside fieldwork? How many of us submit too readily to the claims of professional identity?, etc.)

If we were in the same seminar room, my query might be, should we not now be talking about the visual turn? Most cities I go to, everyday life is now heavily mediated by screens. Is society a movie, or an iPad or a mobile? No; and yet these forms of mediation must also effect what we call second nature. Historically inherited modes of interaction seem to be subject to serious prosthetic modification. The practices of everyday life are transforming before our eyes, or on these screens. These kinds of issues might be connected to claims about the social acceleration of time, or to the new gilded age, or even to the now bloated theme of neo-liberalism. What seems clear is that there are, as ever, pressing issues before us.

I am grateful for the engagement of my interlocutors. There is much that I have to learn from them. Seems to me we all still have our work cut out.