Culture Wars: Where are we now?

THURSDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2018, 11:30am-1:00pm
DIXSON ROOM, State Library of NSW, Sydney

The term ‘culture wars’ has been a rhetorical device for explaining divisions between various groups in Australia and the world for the past 50 years. Oppositions like Western/Eastern, religious/secular, Christian/Muslim, invader/indigenous, even right/left have all been useful to those who have sought to promote social disunity.

This panel reviews the evolution of wider debate about such oppositions from a range of perspectives, both methodological and regional. Thus it looks at the spatial and cultural imaginaries evoked by this rhetoric through the lens of Arab writers, operating in a transnational framework. What are the alternative perspectives about conflicting cultures in the Middle East, occluded by official government policies that we need to hear?

Culture wars are invoked to describe conflicting perspectives within Australia, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups. How might they evolve in the future?

Culture wars are also invoked within Europe as anxieties increase about refugees, migrants and the future of liberal democracies. Are there new ways of considering how globalisation is impinging on debates that speak only in terms of the nation state?

Rhetoric about culture wars may conceal deeper concerns about competing values within broader society. How can these arguments become creative rather than self-destructive?

CHAIR

Professor William Christie FAHA
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

William Christie was appointed the Head of the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University in 2015, after a number of years as Professor of English Literature at the University of Sydney. He was founding President of the Romantic Studies Association of Australasia from 2010-15. He has published widely on different aspects of Romantic literature and literary culture, and his books include Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Literary Life (2006) – awarded the NSW Premier’s Biennial Prize for Literary Scholarship in 2008 – The Letters of Francis Jeffrey to Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle (2008), The Edinburgh Review in the Literary Culture of Romantic Britain (2009), Dylan Thomas: A Literary Life (2014), and The Two Romanticisms, and Other Essays (2016). His current research is on a literary biography of the Scottish editor and critic, Francis Jeffrey, public lecturing during the Romantic period, and cultural relations between China and the West in the modern world.
Selected appointments include Head of the English Section for the Australian Academy of the Humanities; Director, Australasian Consortium of Humanities Research Centres; Research Committee, Australian University Heads of English; Chair of the Editorial Advisory Board, Sydney University Press; Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards NSW; and Reader/assessor for the Australian Research Council.

Dr Jumana Bayeh
MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

Transnationalism, the Middle East & Huntington’s “Cultural Turn”

This paper examines one of the ways that culture is being deployed to address the continuing influence of Huntington’s “clash of civilisations” thesis. Of all the arenas where Huntington’s theory could have been applied, it appears, since its publication, that the Middle East has borne the brunt of its divisive and aggressive logic. Huntington’s divisions are just as much spatial as they are cultural, mapping religious or “civilisational” differences geographically as a way to understand the world we inhabit.

While the “clash of civilisations” thesis has been responded to and widely challenged in political and international relations scholarship, this paper looks to the intervention made by artists, principally writers, from the Arab diaspora. As theoretical frameworks, diaspora and transnationalism are especially suited to questioning Huntington’s seminal work as they are intrinsically concerned with space, and with ways to reconsider and dismantle the sort of spatial demarcations that Huntington’s work imposes. The Arab diaspora writers I will focus on illustrate in their narratives various ways that space is being reimagined and reordered, highlighting that their works of fiction are another frontier in which these very political “culture wars” are being fought today.

Jumana Bayeh is a Lecturer at Macquarie University. She has held research fellowships at the University of Edinburgh and the Lebanese American University in Beirut. She is the author of The Literature of the Lebanese Diaspora: Representations of Place and Transnational Identity as well as a number of articles on Arab diaspora fiction. Her current project examines the mediation of the nation-state in Arab diaspora literature, from writers based in Australia, North America and the United Kingdom, to illustrate how the nation is reimagined by this transnational community.

Professor Mark McKenna FAHA
UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

‘The View from the Ship’ or the ‘View from the Shore’?

As the 250th anniversary of James Cook’s landing at Botany Bay approaches, the Federal and NSW governments have announced a 50 million dollar redevelopment plan for the landing site at Kurnell. “This was the first encounter between Europeans and Aboriginal Australians here on the East Coast”, said Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, announcing the plan in April. “And what this offers us is the opportunity to show the view from the ship and the view from the shore”.
In light of the history of the commemoration of Cook’s landing at Kurnell and recent controversies over the Cook statue in Sydney’s Hyde Park, what chance is there that the 250th anniversary of Cook’s landing will be free from the intensely polarised debates that have marked significant days of national commemoration in Australia since 1970?

Mark McKenna is one of Australia’s leading historians, based at the University of Sydney. He is the author of several prize-winning books, most recently From the Edge: Australia’s Lost Histories, which won the 2017 NSW Premier’s Prize for Australian History, and a biography of historian Manning Clark, An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark, which won the 2012 Prime Minister’s award for non-fiction and the Queensland, Victorian, NSW and South Australian premiers’ non-fiction awards. His most recent publication is his Quarterly Essay, ‘Moment of Truth: History and Australia’s Future’.

Professor McKenna was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2013.

Dr Natalie Doyle
MONASH UNIVERSITY

Beyond the clash of civilizations: Marcel Gauchet and globalisation


Situated within a current of French social and anthropological thought stressing both the role of human imagination in historical creativity and its symbolic constraints, The Disenchantment formulated a hypothesis regarding the secularization of the world. Read superficially, it seemed to go against what Huntington’s analysis stressed: the endurance of religious civilisational legacies. In reality, it offered a sophisticated reinterpretation of modern culture as a new symbolic representation of the world. This representation made possible a new form of “autonomous” power, not only capitalist economics but also profoundly self-reflexive democratic politics.

As Le nouveau monde argues, because of its scientific and technological efficacy, this power was appropriated within different civilizational traditions. As a result, globalisation is unifying the planet through economic exchanges but simultaneously triggering crises of cultural identity across the planet. Gauchet, however, optimistically stresses the longer term dynamics: the appearance of a pacified, de-imperialised common world.
We can benefit from drawing on Gauchet’s argument to redirect attention away from supposedly clashing civilisations to the more important issue of globalisation: he urges us to consider that underneath supposedly neutral notions of science and technology there lies the imaginary of human autonomy, with its profound political implications.

Natalie Doyle is deputy director of the European and EU Centre and a senior lecturer in French Studies in the School of Languages, Literature, Cultures and Linguistics at Monash University. She co-edits Social Imaginaries, a journal of socio-political theory and the book series “Social Imaginaries”, published by Rowman & Littlefield. Dr Doyle has researched for two decades the work of the leading French political philosopher and historian Marcel Gauchet and has produced translations of some of his key texts with critical introductions. In recent years she has written on the contemporary crisis of the European Union and political radicalisation in the name of Islam. Recent publications include Marcel Gauchet and The Loss of Common Purpose: Imaginary Islam and the Crisis of European Democracy (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018) — “the first substantial discussion of Gauchet’s theories in English and so far the most extensive published anywhere” (Johann P. Arnason) — and, co-edited with Irfan Ahmad, (Il)liberal Europe: Islamophobia, Modernity and Radicalization (London & New York: Routledge, 2018).

SPEAKER

Professor Simon Haines FHKAH
RAMSAY CENTRE FOR WESTERN CIVILISATION

Values Clashes in Western Civilisation

I’m more interested in values clashes than culture wars. Whatever else a “culture war” may be, it certainly isn’t a war: but it is a values clash. Such values clashes (the term is Isaiah Berlin’s) are better understood as intra- rather than inter-civilisational. They exist on a huge scale, across centuries; and they are essential to human flourishing. Western civilisation itself is actually founded on deep and even incommensurable values clashes: between Old Testament and New; between classical and Christian values (or virtues, which are not exactly the same thing); between Romantic and Enlightenment (or perhaps neo-classical) values... The clashes themselves are not illusory. People do fundamentally differ and disagree on important values questions, and if they didn’t there wouldn’t really be any values. The relevant conceptual oppositions, meanwhile, are not so much rhetorical devices to promote social division and disunity as attempts to explain what the differences and disagreements are about, on the understanding that we may or may not be able to resolve them, but that we have to get along either way. Tragedy is the literary genre which gives the best form to irresolvable conceptions of value.

After beginning with some thoughts about China and the West, based on the experience of living and teaching in Hong Kong, I will talk briefly about Isaiah Berlin’s conception of the need for values pluralism and why it’s important in thinking about “clashes” and indeed values in general: before concluding with some thoughts about values thinking in the Romantic era, in Shakespeare and in Seamus Heaney.

Simon Haines is CEO of the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation in Sydney. Educated in Iraq, England and Australia, he worked as a banker in London and then as a diplomat and analyst with DFAT and ONA. From 1985-87 he chaired the Budget Committee of the OECD in Paris. He is Chair Professor of English at The Chinese University of Hong Kong and a founding Fellow of the Hong Kong Academy of the Humanities.
He was Head of English and later of Humanities at ANU, where he taught from 1990 to 2008. He is the author or editor of five books including the prizewinning *Reader in European Romanticism* (Bloomsbury, 2010, 2nd paperback edition 2014) and *Poetry and Philosophy from Homer to Rousseau* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), as well as articles, book chapters and papers on subjects including Shakespeare and Hegelian recognition, Romantic poetry, the modern self, and time in philosophy and art. His most recent book is the edited volume *Shakespeare and Value* (Routledge, May 2018).

The Australian Academy of the Humanities’ 49th Symposium *Clash of Civilisations? Where are we now?* will explore modern and ancient cross-cultural encounters and their contemporary implications in the spheres of history, politics, and studies in religion, as well as their cultural expressions in literature, film, and the arts.

The program has been convened by Professor Bronwen Neil FAHA and Professor Catriona Mackenzie FAHA from Macquarie University.

Visit the Academy’s website for more information and to register.

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