

The Australian

Dynamic days of an implicit leftism

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- From: The Australian
- November 23, 2011 12:00AM

I WAS recently asked to reminisce about teaching media and cultural studies in Australia in the late 1980s and early 90s. Doing so made me reflect on two universities where I taught a little and learned a lot: Murdoch and Griffith.

I differed from colleagues who had generally studied literature and gone straight through their academic training. I was a serial dropout: from a doctorate, a graduate certificate and two masters.

I had wandered ineffectually from job to job in Canberra and Sydney, as a radio announcer, credit analyst, research officer and speechwriter. A petty policy bureaucrat, I peddled neoclassical economics to denigrate democracy and masturbate markets. Very 1980s, very naive.

Then I got a fellowship to study public policy at Murdoch. Perth remade me. I met people outside my chosen field who reanimated the cultural Marxism I had taught myself years earlier during my undistinguished undergraduate degree at the Australian National University. They introduced me to media and cultural studies.

This new world combined my interest in political economy and feminism with my liking for popular culture. Plus I was persuaded that years spent in radio, familiarity with policy discourse and an appreciation of Marxism and its groovier relatives made teaching media passible. So I dropped out of the MA in public policy, lost my job security, gave up my studentship, took a massive pay cut -- and felt great. I had a succession of short-term teaching positions that left their mark.

Griffith and Murdoch were remarkable sites of teaching and research, founded on problem-solving rather than scholarly specialisation and parthenogenesis.

At both schools, we worked in teams. Courses were taught by folk whose knowledge arched across ethnomethodology, literary theory, art, political economy, public policy, communications, history and philosophy. Filmmakers operated alongside armchair thinkers. We enjoyed one another's differing perspectives.

But, above all, we were driven by an implicit leftism. We were pro-democratic, pro-popular-culture socialists, and we liked, as much as we doubted, the institutions we were deconstructing.

How odd what I have just written may seem today, when the new right of cultural studies parlays the creative industries, and film people favour apolitical formalism.

I can't comment on Griffith and Murdoch now. It's for them to make their own myths anew and what I remember as dynamic may appear outmoded, archival, even fossil-like. To which I can only reply, as Kissy Suzuki does to James Bond in *You Only Live Twice*: "Think again, please."
