

Sydney-Leeds-Amsterdam

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Three conferences provide Toby Miller with unexpected insight.

I've been to three contrasting conferences in the past month that seem to encapsulate the differences between being inside and outside the Beltway, as they say in DC when referring to access to policymakers and purse strings.

I'm on the international academic advisory committee of the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney. We had our first meeting in June. Afterwards there was a summit. It featured the great and the good talking about issues of global import: world health, reconstruction after disasters, the capitalist crisis, and whether there is now effectively a G2 of China and the US rather than a G7, a G8, or even the one that includes Australia.

During the discussions, I was struck again by how the European Union, by far the world's largest exporter and wealthiest consumer market, is extraordinarily invisible to much of Australian and US academia. The same applies to Latin America and its massive Brazilian powerhouse. Bizarre. The renewed obsession with China is like the hesitant orgasms that people were having in the early 1970s over renewed contact with Beijing after Australians and Yankees had cut themselves off so stupidly from the PRC for two decades.

After listening to policy moguls, corporate mandarins and academic grant-getters in Sydney, it was a remarkable contrast to be in Leeds a few days later for a conference about cosmetic surgery and its cultures. Australians seemed to be leaders there, with a couple of keynotes from Sydney and Adelaide. But the perspectives were political-economic and ethnographic rather than the policy-oriented, pro-capital debates at the summit meeting. Leeds featured critical intellectuals rather than people at the apex of the elite.

Art was as important as science. Feminists and fellow travellers discussed the contradictions of elective medical interventions and their links to gender and power. Whereas I'd been an audience member at the US Studies gabfest, I was asked to speak in Leeds about metrosexuality and the pressures on US men to improve their looks for economic reasons. The data are there in terms of breast reduction, liposuction, botox, and so on. Whereas the Economist newspaper (I know you think it's a magazine, but it doesn't agree) had been a sponsor of the Sydney event, where folks wore expensive business attire in their hundreds at a downtown hotel, in the UK cosmetic cultures was a small affair peopled by young scholars concerned with progressive activism and knowledge rather than elite discourse.

Then I went to Amsterdam, to talk at a conference on the 'ends of television'. This was, like the Leeds event, a very international occasion, with mostly young professors from all over, again including Australia. It was put on by the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis and located right in the city centre. I rented a pedicab and posed as a local trying to give tourists rides around the canals but was not very successful - I didn't know where I was going.

Like the cosmetic cultures meeting, the TV conference was primarily a critical event - tightly knit, very focused, and not interested in educating the public to accept the views of a particular perspective such as neoliberalism. In fact, if one had used a straightforward rhetoric of consumer choice as a policy basis it would have seemed odd.

If you're a regular reader of this column, you might anticipate that I was more comfortable at these latter occasions than the corporate Australian bash.

But Leeds and Amsterdam brought home to me that the market logic embraced by the Sydney mandarins has been an enormous boon to academia, and in a couple of ways.

First (not so great for my people), it gave power to conventional economists and public policy professors in ways they could only have dreamt of before their desires and postulates fitted in with the international ruling class and its political representatives after Keynesianism was discredited in the 1970s. Now, of course, that moment has gone, and they must reinvent themselves as they awake to find their fantasies really were just that. But they had 30 years in the sun, and they retain a residual credibility as a consequence. Good luck to them.

A second impact of the temporary triumph of market logic was that it compelled those of us on the left to deal with the contradictions of seeing structural oppression that occurred under the sign of choice even as we desired choice at individual and collective levels.

So there was something to neoliberalism. It had its moment. We can see that even as we celebrate the fact that it is discredited and lament that its death throes still dog public policy. Laissez-faire brought choice back into the calculus of the everyday. But it just didn't know where to stop.

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