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From the Prophets Deserts Come : the Struggle to Reshape Australian Political Culture

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From the Prophets Deserts Come: The Struggle to Reshape Australian Political Culture

Boris Frankel, 1992
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At last! A book that offers a coherent and accessible critique of the current struggle to redefine Australia's political culture. For all those frustrated classroom teachers, school administrators and academics feeling the pain of economic rationalist policies this book is essential reading. *From the Prophets Deserts Come* (1992) is a book that makes a valuable contribution to both our understanding of and potential resistance to the agenda of the free-marketeers. It is a sharp reminder that education is a part of a much broader ideological struggle to reshape Australia's cultural, economic and political values and practices.

It would be impossible in a short review to do justice to the range and scope of this book. I shall focus instead, on the central arguments of Frankel's analysis and the implications for education. Boris Frankel's book sets out to expose the 'arid consequences spreading from the current generation of political, economic and cultural prophets' and why their socio-cultural and political-economic diagnoses and solutions of our problems will create 'both social deserts as well as actual ecological ones' (p.5).

In the process Boris Frankel offers a powerful, engaging and challenging analysis of the dominant political-culture base on a 'globally competitive' Australia. Frankel argues that the economic rationalist belief in 'ever-expanding industrial production, ever-decreasing use of human labour due to technology and market competitiveness, sustained cost-cutting efficiencies in all public and private services combined with a miraculous growth in consumer's disposal income is fundamentally inconsistent and highly irrational' (p.333). In his view, the New Right, Old Right and populist Far-Right offer solutions that only vary in the degree of their authoritarianism, conservatism, intolerance and inequality (p.334).

Frankel is just as scathing of the Accordists. He believes they suffer from the same fundamental flaws as earlier generations of Social Democratic Keynesians. The Accordists he argues, have abandoned the inward looking national Keynesian strategies of the Whitlam era and instead, pinned their hopes for greater welfare and justice on the notion of an ever-expanding global market. Frankel contends that the belief in the 'globally

competitive good-fairy private sector is just as big an illusion as earlier misplaced hopes in the cooperation of local businesses' (p.334).

In Frankel's view, the lessons of the past two decades show that neither the feminist nor green movements have established the credentials to effectively counter the political, social and economic dominance of the 'dries'. Despite their opposition to the economisation of Australian public and private life, Frankel believes they will remain marginal so long as they continue to ignore major economic - political issues.

In the case of feminism, Frankel argues that it has abandoned a radical socio-political agenda in favour of a narrow theoreticism and piece-meal reformism thus presenting no threat to mainstream culture. He believes there is no shortage of former feminists who earlier denounced 'male' organisational and cultural practices only to join the career 'boys'. Thus feminism continues as both a marginal movement and part of the redefined mainstream culture (p.209).

Frankel is of the opinion that the green movement will also remain a marginal and comfortable middle-class movement unless it can show the feasibility of its genuinely exciting utopian alternatives. This means persuading millions of Australian workers and their dependents of how they will be better off in relation to jobs, income, security and lifestyle. He says that while everyone had become an 'environmentalist' very few became radical political economists and alternative cultural practitioners (p.226-227).

In Frankel's view, these social movements can only become an effective alternative to the dominant political-cultural if they develop 'detailed agendas based on new forms of political administration and decision making, plus new legal, educational, tele-communication, social welfare, energy, and cultural structures that are compatible with an environmental sustainable economy' (p.335). In short, they must construct a workable alternative political economy.

Turning to the postmodernists and post-structuralists Frankel argues that most of them are economically illiterate. He considers that most of the 'critical readings of written and audio-visual 'texts' rarely went beyond this 'culturalist activity'. He believes that postmodern politics became little more than the application of post-structuralist theories to all sorts of cultural products divorced from anti-capitalist politics (p.195). Frankel is critical of postmodernists for their failure to address vital economic matters

related to labour processes, capital accumulating strategies in the private and public sectors and class conflict. He claims that 'postmodernism' makes empty gestures of 'resistance' while alternating between bouts of nostalgia and pessimism' (p.197).

In regard to education, Frankel argues that both the dominant 'dry' and Accordist education prophets share a similar disastrous free-market agenda. From different perspectives, both want to build appropriate 'human capital' strategies such as skill formation, training, core curriculum and narrowly based notions of vocational education. He argues that 'education and work are being synthesised into a life-long process of credentialised competition for a declining pool of full time jobs that no longer hold out the promise of life-time durability or security' (p.295).

In the case of the Accordists, they hope that a restructured education system will enable workers to enjoy the benefits of a modernised competitive capitalist economy in which old-fashioned class conflict is replaced by a technocratic meritocracy of precise skills and qualifications (p.296). A major problem in Frankel's view is that the obsession with narrow vocationalism and training overlooks the major fact that the private sector has consistently failed to provide sufficient jobs, no matter how well trained and credentialised the students may be.

In contrast the 'dries' want a deregulated labour market combined with the further rationalisation of the public and private sectors, strong anti-union policies, lower wage rates and more casual work. The dry education prophets want to see greater standardisation of curriculum content, a regressive voucher system, loans, and the re-establishment of elite universities (p.297). Frankel believes that so far the Left and social movements have failed to deliver an organisation and pedagogical strategy that can effectively counter both the Old Right and the new economic rationalist (p.303).

Frankel argues that 'while there are many successful corporations, few are known for their democratic structures, let alone their commitment to equality, justice and tolerance of views that contradict management policy'. For him, a public sphere that depends on educational institutions such as those being shaped today will inevitably become 'culturally impoverished, mean spirited and barren' (p.306).

The arguments in this book are both compelling and unsettling. The style makes the book accessible to a wider audience than is possible with most academic writings on such important matters.

Frankel assembles his arguments in a precise, direct, and persuasive manner. While some readers will find cause for pessimism others will see an opportunity for building alternative social, economic and political values and practices. In this way it may be possible to challenge the dominant prophets more effectively than has been the case so far. This book is a very good start.

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