

What's going on

Revolution, toxic sludge and other virtues



The freewheelin'
Peter Geyer

Spin is an effective
tool with the ability
to douse fires and
chloroform debate

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*Sometimes, there's this notion that everyone
has to think the same way.*

Chris Judd

We want the world and we want it ... now?

Jim Morrison

*The revolution will not give your mouth sex
appeal ... The revolution will not be televised
– it will be live!*

Gil Scott-Heron

If you can believe what's been written and
said about psychological type over the past
decades, then good perception and good
judgement are required for making good
decisions.

This is not simply about the possession of
a preference, such as a tendency to look
for facts or the big picture, or even to use
objective or personal criteria for important
moments. It's about the ability to use
natural preferences astutely, and to have
some access to other perspectives, whether
personally or through acquaintances and
other sources.

The senior Liberal Party figure Malcolm
Turnbull was recently described by a colleague as possessing 'many great qualities, but emotional intelligence or a very obvious concern for others is not one of them' (Wilmoth 2008). Whether this will block or facilitate the ascension of the aspiring Opposition Leader into the top job depends on what the majority of his colleagues see as the key criteria for political leadership.

Saying 'sorry' to the stolen generations of
Aboriginal people, for instance, is a feeling
statement: but that doesn't mean those who
prefer thinking can't make it – although it
may require thinking logic to see that it's
the right thing to say.

As a feeling statement, it's a statement with
meaning, but without consequences (e.g.
compensation, blame). It's also subjective,
so comparisons with similar events (e.g.,
other invasions and similar government
decisions elsewhere in time and place) are
not relevant or appropriate. Finally, feeling
speaks to the nature of aboriginal cultures,
whether or not individuals in them have
that preference.

It doesn't follow that everyone agrees with
the proposition. Some may be stuck in the
consequences in both cultures, or think they
are being directly and unfairly blamed for
past events in which they did not participate:
a curious perspective to me, one that does
not seem all that objective. Those preferring
thinking can approach feeling warily, for
good reason, and the reverse applies, too,
something readily apparent in a society
looking for 'outcomes', 'closure' or
'moving on', whatever these might be.

*Look what's happenin' out in the street!
Got to revolution! (Got to revolution!)*

Jefferson Airplane

Saying 'sorry' is a kind of revolutionary
act. In some respects it's no accident that
large groups of people, Indigenous and
otherwise, participated in 'sorry'-related
activities in public places across Australia.
This is particularly relevant in a society
where emotional expression is largely

regulated, even for what might seem to be illegal activities, such as the consumption of particular substances at certain events.

It might all be how you behave, of course. People stand in various spots to observe fireworks at designated times and places of celebration. Important sports occasions are vehicles for singing the national anthem and waving (or wearing) the Australian flag, the underlying feeling being something like scheduling spontaneity, with minimal arrests. Licences are required for street parties in many areas, a kind of diarised fun, I suppose.

Cricket Australia's James Sutherland thinks crowds have to 'get it right' as far as their behaviour goes, missing the point that much of the crowd is there for the event, not the cricket. This could be a simple consequence of the identification of sport with entertainment, a double-edged sword.

But perhaps it follows a tradition going back thousands of years, in what Barbara Ehrenreich calls 'Dionysian celebration' (2006): spontaneous, anti-authority and often out-of-hand – although participants included local rulers, as well as elements of Christian celebration and its regulation. Ehrenreich sees the radical movements of the 1960s as Dionysian: dancing, singing, music, riot, anarchy. Hippies, Yippies and Zippies, eventually put down in the customary way, by regulation, leaving us with the boundaried enthusiasm of an American presidential campaign or reality television.

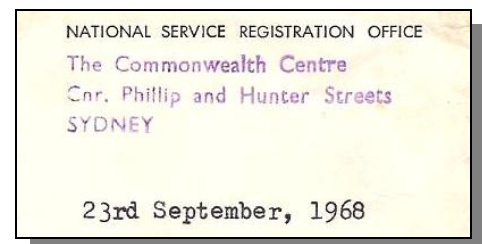
*I speak tonight for the peace of mankind
and the destiny of democracy.*

Lyndon Johnson

It's said that 'If you remember the Sixties, you weren't really there', implying that it was a period of excesses of drugs, alcohol and sex, and nothing else that occurred was worth reporting or remembering, an aberration of history. But the phrase, originally a throwaway line meant for amusement, also serves to block access to this period, stifling serious evaluation and assessment. This is particularly unfortunate given some of the events in that period.

The USA, for instance, had charismatic politicians (irrespective of later exposed foibles) in 1968, in an environment not dissimilar to that of 2008, including the waging of an unpopular war, albeit now without the assistance of an armed forces draft system. If you were a student then, as I was, the call-up was always over your head as a future event that might have unpleasant consequences, to say the least. The nation was divided over this and other issues, a reality somewhat different from the paradise in which 'baby-boomers' are supposed to have grown up.

The postmodernism movement has its origins in the May 1968 riots in Paris, which played a role in bringing down the French government and constitution. Amongst its presumptions (e.g. Hinkson 1987) is that the events affected everyone, everywhere: a somewhat extravagant claim.



Then again, like the suffixing of '-gate' to every scandal since 1973, there are similar, equally dubious claims made about events such as the deaths of Princess Diana, John F Kennedy and Steve Irwin, as well as the first Moon landing and '9/11'.

On the Internet you'll find many places that contest accepted wisdom, and even facts, regarding these and other events. Internet apostate Andrew Keen (2007) identifies much of this sort of activity as what has been called 'democratization'. Individuals can express their opinions and creativity, the latter implying that this is a capacity available to everyone, notably those with a mouse and a monitor.

Identifying this phenomenon as 'the cult of the amateur', Keen describes a world where facts are dispensable, even editable as on Wikipedia, facilitated by people who disdain expertise and the works of others. That could be real democracy, but I wonder whether it's desirable, helpful or useful.



Claims that the events of May 1968 affected everyone everywhere are extravagant

Does God look down on the boys in the bar room, lately forsaken but surely not judged?

Robert Hunter

You don't have to engage with your laptop to encounter flexibility with truth or lack of interest in appreciating that there might be such a thing. Often this involves some person or entity having trouble with acknowledgement and apology.

The physical approach of ticket inspectors on Melbourne's public transport arouses attention from time to time, as do customer service issues. Christopher Scanlan recently observed that 'commuters seem to be regarded as enemies who are presumed guilty' (2008), a claim which disappointed the relevant management, who were provided with space to say what they were doing for customers, none of which related to any of Scanlan's claims.

In similar vein, evidence that animals were mistreated and otherwise unnecessarily exploited the Melbourne Zoo drew the response from a senior manager that staff were working hard and as a team, which, even if it were the case, wasn't the point at issue.

Essentially this is 'spin', a remarkably effective tool with the ability to douse fires and chloroform debate that is genuinely astounding. In their book *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You* (with an example of such a proposition), John Stauber and Sheldon Ramton provide various examples of how activities dangerous to human health and wellbeing have been justified by the astute use of word and image (2004).

Asked whether he would continue to sell a product that was dangerous to health, a senior Enron figure replied that as his duty was to the company shareholders, he would continue to sell the product (Haigh 2006). This is impeccable logic when you come to think of it, but perhaps it misses out on other important aspects of cognition.

You can also appeal to the nature of your job in order to avoid any accountability you might have for others' misfortunes. Britney Spears, currently troubled and in an apparently perilous psychiatric state, is

a case in point. Whatever the other aspects of her plight, they can't be helped by the across-town paparazzi pursuit of her, nor for Heath Ledger in his confrontations with similar people.

Tell me, who do you think they're supposed to believe, when you tell them you've got the keys to the rain?

Robert Hunter

Part of the unappreciated aspect of effective spin is that it also has a basis in saying something positive, as a way of addressing an issue. Whether this leads to a genuine disconnection between what happened and the minds of senior executives and powerful individuals is hard to say, but there's a bit of evidence for that lying around, mainly in the realm of self-interest.

One of the principles of modern economies is that individual self-interest benefits the community as a whole: what's beneficial to shareholders is beneficial to everyone else. The logic and historicity of this proposition isn't readily apparent, other than it's good to have a strong economy, but there are other issues as well.

Taking a solely economic view to saying 'sorry', or even to climate change, misses the point, and is it the case that the market has a certain cognitive privilege? Is there a world to consider beyond the boardroom and the bourse, and does it matter?

Certain skills and personal attributes can be favoured either way, but sometimes there are quirks in management policy that confuse.

In his history of James Hardie Industries, Gideon Haigh depicts the company's management over several decades as closed and secretive overall, resisting costly changes to working conditions because of the health problems associated with asbestos dust and fibres. Yet, paradoxically, they were seen as decent men by a predominantly loyal workforce, as well as some government workplace health officials.

Jargon catchphrases and the like can assist communication at one level, if people know what they mean. Often though, language



If you were a student then, the call-up was always over your head as a future event

and circumstance cloud issues. The former Federal Education Minister, Julie Bishop, once made a return to the unremembered 1960s by identifying teachers as Maoists: obviously pejorative, but left unexplained and unexamined.

For instance, identifying something as a 'KPI' (key performance indicator) may actually deaden what it is or means, and render the text around it incomprehensible.

One of the reasons health issues may be conflicted is that a standard glass of wine or beer, or a serve of a particular food, as defined by research, doesn't seem to bear any resemblance to categories that people use, like the glass they might hold in their hand at a barbecue or restaurant.

The Internet and the market economy are associated with freedom and choice. However, the sociolinguist George Lakoff points out that, in the United States at least, there is no consistent understanding of what that might mean. 'Freedom is freedom is freedom' was the most articulate statement he could get from one prominent academic in the field of politics.

But maybe it's all common sense. That's the position of businessman Gerry Harvey who, in regard to his company's offering of no payments on purchases for lengthy periods, expresses the belief that it is just 'common sense' that people wouldn't buy if they were in financial difficulty. Their choice, perhaps.

This may be all about good perception and good judgement, and a recognition that people in all stratas of society may be just bumbling along in this regard. Many people in decision-making positions may simply not have the ability or insight, however defined, to make good decisions outside of automatic parameters like shareholders, or defending what an individual or organisation did, without examining the possibility of apology.

So they may reject (usually saying 'refute', an entirely different thing) other opinions or challenges to the probity or otherwise of their actions, simply by saying so.

And then life goes on.

Bit of a toxic sludge, really. ❖

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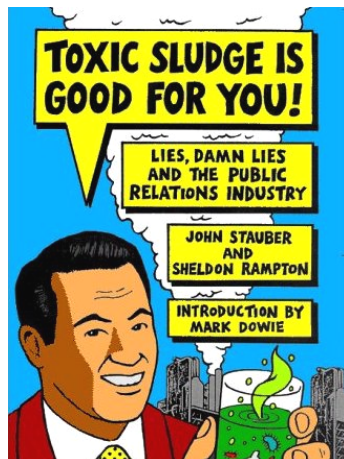
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Our final title was borrowed from the Tom Tomorrow cartoon ... a cynical, exaggerated parody of deceptive public relations.

Then Nancy Blatt called ... she was concerned that the title might interfere with the [Water Environment] Federation's plans to transform the image of sewage sludge.

'It's not toxic', she said, 'and we're launching a campaign to get people to stop calling it sludge. We call it "biosolids".'

John Stauber & Sheldon Ramton,
Toxic Sludge Is Good For You



Dangerous activities
have been justified
by the astute use of
word and image