

In Praise of Experimental Institutions: After May 1968

Meaghan Morris

The intellectual is on the margins of the common body of knowledge. By knowing things which come from elsewhere (the 'frontiers' of science and technology, the strange, almost perverse discourses of the humanities, and other cultures) he or she makes raids on common myths at the same time as building up new ones which will come to count as common knowledge one day. It is Paddy Roe's confidence in the knowledge of his own culture which enables him to challenge in such a forceful way European notions of marriage and he saves one of his countrymen from seven years of suffering. This is perhaps the power of the intellectual; to intervene in a situation and tell a story which can change the conventions for understanding things.

*Reading the Country*¹

When I was stumped for a topic to bring to the *Reading the Country* festival, Philip Morrissey suggested something about the student-worker uprising of May 1968 in Paris and its implications for universities, along with the 'sense of possibility' around the Humanities in Australia in the early 1980s when *Reading the Country* was composed; then, something about the situation today in which people seek to recapture the political energies of that now rather distant past. This was a clear, reasonable brief for one of my age and experience and yet it sent me from stumped to stymied. While I have joyfully surfed waves created by May '68 for much of my intellectual life, I never felt that I *understood* those events that took place when I was in my last year of high school in the country town of East Maitland, New South Wales. I was once scolded by my friend

the radical Melbourne thinker Boris Frankel for ‘admitting’² that my family only read the *Maitland Mercury* and at the time I saw an article covering the Paris events only as a big garbage strike. But this is not a shameful confession: to know that it is possible to change common knowledge it matters to remember what the East Coast white working-class country was like in 1968. Life was not completely parochial; we backed the unions and we certainly knew about the war in Vietnam. Our families quarrelled over the war and I pasted atrocity photos cut from the *Mercury* on my school exercise books in protest. Later at university I would read about May ’68, mostly things written from France or Britain, but understanding seemed always out of reach—like the flouncy New Look dresses I adored on my older cousins, only to find mini-skirts on sale when I was old enough to dress up. 1969 was not a great time to be a young woman harangued (and worse) in an Australian university by New Left student leaders. Women’s Liberation erupted on campuses then for a reason.

So Philip’s brief was hard and how could I link this anyway to *Reading the Country*? I thought about how I first met Stephen Muecke and his friend Krim Benterrak in Paris around 1976, before *Reading the Country* and in the aftermath of May 1968. Stephen was an exotic person to me; he lived in Perth and in that time before affordable trans-continental plane trips I had never before met anyone who did. (I probably had no idea that people like Paddy Roe existed ‘over there’; Australia had no truly national media-sphere until satellite transmission began in 1985). Stephen was studying at the cutting edge and scientifically respectable University of Paris VII-Jussieu in the Latin Quarter. Julia Kristeva taught there though I don’t think that mattered to Stephen. I arrived to study eighteenth-century French women’s novels (a topic I chose as good for a scholarship out of Australia) at the cutting edge and romantically disreputable University of Paris VIII-Vincennes in the woods on the fringe of the city. Deleuze taught there and that ended up mattering to me. What didn’t matter much to foreign students then were the boundaries between institutions. Once enrolled in the Paris university system you could audit any classes you liked. So a bunch of us would go to different places to hear the weekly lectures by our

favourites (Foucault and Deleuze for me) and try out others now and then. We sat on the floor for Barthes' packed-out Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France. I went to hear Derrida once and he spoke like he wrote so I almost fell asleep. I saw Lacan once, too; he really did stay analytically silent for most of the hour and the bejewelled *bourgeoise* sitting next to me held opera glasses up to catch his every expression. Practising transference, I guess. Waiting for Irigaray and Kristeva to have a cat-fight one time at the Pompidou Centre, police funnelled the huge crowd towards closed glass doors with such force that they smashed and people up front were cut, blood everywhere. It was strange to go to London for language relief and see violence like that at rock concerts.

I know how this sounds. And yes it was exciting and it changed my life and we were lucky to drift in from Australia right there, just then. But those starry-eyed moments are not what formed something in me, a path or a 'mobile diagonal line'³ that hooked me up with Stephen again in the radical BA Communication course at the New South Wales Institute of Technology (NSWIT) where I taught Semiotics and experimental cinema from 1978 to 1985, the year he came; and not what took me back a decade later to the 'University of Technology, Sydney' where we started a journal, *The UTS Review: Cultural Studies and New Writing*, in part to help people cope with the newly emerging pressure to have publications refereed.⁴ Our first issue in 1995 was on 'Intellectuals and Communities', with the Samoan poet Sia Figiel on the cover and essays by Rey Chow, Bruce Robbins, Philip Morrissey, Ghassan Hage and Ruth Barcan as well as Figiel's poetry inside. The next year we did an issue with Chris Healy asking 'Is an Experimental History Possible?', featuring Stephen on histories of Kimberley colonialism up front. Looking at these for the first time in years, I suddenly see how May 1968 and *Reading the Country* are indeed linked for me. That 'something' those Paris years formed was a need as well as a passion for inhabiting experimental institutions, for creating or visiting places of learning, teaching, talking, storytelling, thinking, writing and reading that materially bring changes into the world that were hitherto not meant to be.

So to come back to *Reading the Country* let me talk about Paris VIII-Vincennes and the idea of intellectual life that it fostered. Like most students I had a fuzzy impression of the past of the place where I studied but it was commonplace to believe that a new university had been created out in the Vincennes Woods in 1969 to get *gauchiste* (far left) staff and students as far away from cobble-stones as possible. A recent article by Paul Cohen celebrating the fortieth birthday of Paris-VIII explains that the story was more complicated.⁵ Vincennes took shape as an experiment at the intersection of at least two government strategies for higher education reform. One was to modernise France's sclerotic university system in the hope of forestalling further revolts by expanding enrolments, reducing ministry oversight, opening up governance to faculty and student participation and fostering a spirit of interdisciplinarity. This strategy was about the future. The other was aftermath management: to separate across the system, not just at Vincennes, 'enemies whose post-1968 animosities threatened to bring universities to a halt'.⁶ Thus Vincennes had a 'right-wing twin' across the city at the economics, business and political science programme of Paris 1X-Dauphine.

There are beautiful universities elsewhere whose physical design is said to have been shaped to make mass demonstrations and riots impossible: the University of California at Santa Cruz, for example, and the mountainous main campus of the National University of Singapore. Thrown up in great haste, the shabby prefab buildings of Vincennes were intended to create an egalitarian world of collective discussion and decision-making. There were no Sorbonne-style amphitheatres for god-professorial speech. Seminar rooms were a new thing in France, but to hear Deleuze you just had to arrive in time to pack in to the flat space of a sort of Nissan Hut where, with windows closed against the cold and the air clogged with cigarette smoke, people sometimes fainted from lack of oxygen. Appointed by a group led by the feminist Hélène Cixous, advised by Barthes, Lacan, Georges Canguilhem and Derrida, the entire faculty was left wing. Foucault created a Philosophy Department including Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar, Jacques Rancière and Michel Serres, with Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard joining just after Foucault left

in 1970 for the Collège de France. Cohen has an anecdote that captures the difference in spirit between the great political experiment of Vincennes and the sad discipleship rivalries organised oedipally by these names in the Anglo-American academy now. Vincennes was introducing new areas of study to France: Cinema, Computer Science, a version of Linguistics that had room for sociolinguistics and generative grammar, Plastic Arts, women's and gender studies and Psychoanalysis. To make room for the latter, Foucault 'volunteered to sacrifice faculty positions in his own department to make the creation of a Lacanian-inflected centre possible'.⁷

Intellectual debates between these parties were certainly furious and the conflicts on campus between Communist (PCF), Trotskyist and Maoist factions were vicious, leading to the forces of the Left turning bitterly on each other in the isolation of Vincennes. By the time I went there six years after it opened the graffiti-smearred campus was a battered, ugly and often scary place. However, reading past polemics without their wider institutional context impoverishes our political legacy. The founders of Vincennes were united in what Raymond Williams called a 'project' of broad social transformation as distinct from battering down on 'defensible' disciplinary objects.⁸ Two of the policies furthering that project had a more profound impact on me than even the cast of professors. One was an open admissions policy allowing people with work experience who had never finished high school to enrol in Vincennes' programs and participate on an equal footing with students fresh from school with their *baccalauréats*. The other was the principled refusal by members of the influential Philosophy Department to award discriminatory course credits. To pass their courses you just signed a piece of paper; passing his around, Deleuze would say that a human being cannot 'fail' philosophy. However when Lacan's Maoist daughter Judith Miller went public with this in an interview, further sharing her desire to destroy the university as a 'piece of capitalist society',⁹ the Department lost accreditation and this affected the whole aura of Vincennes. Not least, it induced a demographic shift in a highly diverse student body with very large numbers of men, but few women, from francophone North and West Africa (that is, former French

colonies) and a mixture of men and women from other parts of the world with some white French women. The shift was that white French men, happy to hang out at star courses but unwilling to enrol in a vocationally worthless degree, became a minority in much of the everyday life of the campus.

This all came together in a sustained two-year culture shock for a white country girl whose experience of race, class and ethnicity was shaped in Tenterfield and Maitland by Australian colonial relations and postwar immigration policies. Some days I would dread the long trip out to Vincennes where a strategic insufficiency of buses to campus from the Metro led to punch-ups between queuing and non-queuing cultures (the former mostly Anglo, the latter including the French). At one time there was an outbreak of Eldridge Cleaver-style aggression toward white women as ‘property’ through whom the French colonial ex-master could be touched. In my experience this was a politics of humiliation rather than immediate violence, but it made a long day out there oppressive in a very intimate way. Yet you might share a seminar on, say, cross-cultural theories of gender with men from Algeria, Morocco, Mali and Senegal—some Muslim, others Catholic, some aristocrats funded from their homelands, others migrant workers come to Paris from poor rural backgrounds—and you had to stand up and make your case. You had to be willing to explain everything you said to anyone who asked anything at Vincennes and that ‘all in’ culture was magic. It taught me how to fight with good humour and to despise unctuous versions of self-hating political correctness. It taught me trust, and how to learn from strangers by creating something in common between us, even just a conversation, that had not been possible before. It taught me in the end how to teach and how to write so that a mixed bunch of people might want to understand me.

Storytelling as way of ‘changing the conventions for understanding things’, as *Reading the Country* put it, was vital to life at Vincennes, even if your powers of narration failed. An experience I shared once in a text with Stephen is worth repeating here.¹⁰ I did a seminar run by Serge Moscovici, the ‘social ecologist’ who argued that all significant change is driven by minorities. Juliet Mitchell’s *Psychoanalysis and*

Feminism had just come out in French and since I was the only woman in the class and the only Anglophone who might explain why the British were only now discovering Freud, he asked me to give two sessions presenting her argument in my bad French to those for whom the book was too long to read. Speaking bad French was okay at Vincennes, but I stumbled early on when Boilême, an Algerian migrant worker, interrupted to ask, ‘Who’s Oedipus?’ I needed to step back from Mitchell’s text to tell the original story, creating common knowledge where there was none before, but for the life of me I could not remember it in enough detail to achieve the classical aura required. So after my mutterings about a swollen foot and the Sphinx and killing your father and marrying your mother and not sure how it ended, Boilême said in a puzzled way, ‘but that’s a stupid story!’ Inclined to think so too, I wanted to laugh but in Vincennes protocol I had to try to explain why many great Western minds had thought that it wasn’t a stupid story. I didn’t do a good job, haplessly exposing that it was conventional to pretend familiarity with classical matters that weren’t really common knowledge at all. Moscovici enjoyed this hugely and pushed us all into an intense discussion of appropriate ways of acknowledging the sexuality of your parents and what makes a story ‘good’. Our different ways of thinking about these things formed the knowledge we created in common that day.

I would experience the intellectual magic enabled by an open admissions policy again in my NSWIT years and to this day I believe that it is the best undergraduate experience that a university can provide. Institutions that undertake this are ‘experimental’ in a special way; they intervene transformatively in existing social relations as well as producing new curricula and this combination changes knowledges practices, ‘the conventions for understanding things’. Of course, there are many kinds of institutions (including right-wing experiments, like Paris IX-Dauphine or the powerful think tanks we know in Australia today) and they all have rules, like the tamarind tree in Stephen’s essay in this volume. Some institutions are esoteric, open only to initiates; some make their rules more public than others, and some have rules about not having rules. Whatever the case, reflecting on the affordances

of those rules and working with them to shape possibilities for shared experience is often what the process of initiating change is all about.

Going back with this in mind to the passages from *Reading the Country* that discuss Paddy Roe's practice as a 'specific' intellectual in Foucault's sense I am struck by two things. One is that the text does not situate the intellectual as 'outside' institutional space or on a 'society's' margins, both romantic versions of intellectual positioning that would be highly inappropriate for describing Paddy Roe's relationship to 'a particular Aboriginal institution: traditional culture of the Broome area'.¹¹ On the contrary, the margin that the intellectual occupies in *Reading the Country* is defined in relation to the 'common body of knowledge' because he or she brings to that knowledge something 'from elsewhere'. This is a margin moving into that common body in order to change it, not one being expelled or excluded from it. (Serge Moscovici would have liked that.)

The second thing that strikes me is how the text ascribes Paddy Roe's capacity to act effectively from that margin to a storytelling power he draws not only from his confident knowledge of his own culture but also from his ethnographic willingness to 'read' another culture so as to tell some stories in a way that members of that culture can understand (and then bring the story of *that* telling back to country). In the book, Paddy Roe tells Stephen and Krim a story about explaining to white welfare officers why it was all right in 'black man's law' for a man to be travelling with his twelve year old 'promised girl'. Able to read the white law's conventions for understanding this situation, Paddy Roe is able to explain why their application has been mistaken. As a result, the man is released from a seven-year jail sentence and the girl is freed from a convent.¹² Glossing this story in relation to a preceding discussion by Paddy Roe of belief and the nature of law, Stephen writes:

From the discussion with Paddy Roe, and his story, it is easy to see how different cultures produce different sorts of truths which hold good only within their own systems. But Paddy Roe's approach is 'intellectual' in the sense that he

doesn't dismiss the white man's institutions out of hand; he reads them from a perspective which takes into account cultural similarity and difference. Christianity and bugar-rigarra thus have 'invisibility' in common.¹³

My story here has been about discovering a way to situate *Reading the Country* in relation to my own experience of the political energy that moved between institutional experiments created in the aftermath of May '68 in Paris and in Sydney. I must insist that I am not suggesting that this was Stephen's trajectory, either before or after collaborating on the book; whatever he might want to say himself about times in France, the Aboriginal institutions of the Broome area have clearly been generative for him. However, in turning to Philip Morrissey's question about the situation today it also seems important to say that my appreciation of the achievement of *Reading the Country* owes more now to the twenty-five years I have spent experimenting with intellectual and activist friends in Asia than to those ordinary moments that I was indeed fortunate to spend in Paris. In often ferociously hostile circumstances, the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies network between Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea as well as Australia has been able to create out of nothing and sometimes successfully to defend from assault undergraduate courses and programs, postgraduate schools, numerous research centres, a biennial conference, a summer school, a teaching camp and a refereed journal.¹⁴ These not only keep earlier political experiments alive (the Bandung Asian-African conference of 1955 is exemplary) but work collectively to create the new institutional energies needed for survival as intellectuals in the region are wedged between, on the one hand, the globalising policy-sharing that ever more tightly links different national education systems and, on the other hand, the diverse political pressures that everywhere attend the growing power exerted by the PRC.

In this situation we all have a lot to learn from the method of *Reading the Country* and the intellectual strategies of Paddy Roe as the book presents them. I don't yet feel enough at home back in Australia to make suggestions about what people here might do, but I can make two observations. First, the

art of reading institutions through cultural similarity and difference can be practised anywhere, and using one's wits and storytelling powers to make raids on common myths while taking advantage of institutional rules generally works better and more pleasurably to sustain energy than 'speaking bitterness' (as the Chinese say) alone. Second, I think it is vital now to look beyond the institutional Anglo-sphere for allies and for inspiration. If I have foregrounded here some aspects of my own ignorance in the past that seem a bit shocking now, it has been in part to come back around to saying that none can be sure of knowing what others or indeed ourselves in the future will feel that we should have known now. I am sure, however, that the PRC will play a pressing role in Australia's future one way or another, including in our universities, and that therefore the political energies unleashed by the remarkable Occupy Central movement triggered by high school student activism in Hong Kong in 2015 may well become as consequential for future experiments as May '68 has been for decades. But this is (of course) another story.¹⁵

Notes

- 1 Krim Bentrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, Revised edition (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1996), pp. 195-6.
- 2 The scare quotes here are mine.
- 3 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, pp. 293-8. The diagonal is a line that can carry us to a place we were not supposed to be.
- 4 Now published by UTS e-Press, this journal still exists as *Cultural Studies Review*: <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj/index>.
- 5 Paul Cohen, 'Happy Birthday Vincennes! The University of Paris-8 Turns Forty', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 69, 2010, pp. 206-24. Further references in parentheses in the text. 'Vincennes' was relocated to Saint-Denis in 1980, but the old name still sticks.
- 6 Cohen, p. 209.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- 8 Raymond Williams, 'The Future of Cultural Studies' in *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, Verso, London, 1989, pp. 151-62.
- 9 Cohen, p. 211.
- 10 Meaghan Morris with Stephen Muecke, 'Relations of Theory: a Dialogue', in *Outside The Book: Contemporary Essays on Literary Periodicals*, ed. David Carter, Local Consumption Publications, Sydney, 1991, pp. 57-68.
- 11 Bentrak, Muecke and Roe, p. 195.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 193-5.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 195.

- 14 See the personal stories of experimental institution-building collected in Meaghan Morris and Mette Hjort (eds), *Creativity and Academic Activism: Instituting Cultural Studies*, Hong Kong University Press and Duke University Press, Hong Kong and Durham, 2012.
- 15 I tell some of this story in 'Getting a Life: Expatriate Uses of New Media in Hong Kong', in Larissa Hjorth and Olivia Khoo (eds), *Routledge Handbook of New Media in Asia*, Routledge, London and New York, 2015.