

**The Times Will Suit Them: Postmodern Conservatism in Australia**

*Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe*  
*Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2008, 256 pp. AUD \$35.00*

Boucher and Sharpe have provided a significant contribution to the examination of the Howard government and its effect upon Australian politics and society. Their work is ambitious whilst being thoroughly detailed, forming a refreshing perspective on Howard's place in contemporary political history. Drawing upon a number of disparate academic disciplines, their analysis displays an interestingly original interpretation on the current state of Australian politics and society. The book is divided into two broadly linked sections, politics and society, demonstrating an interesting interaction between these two spheres of Australian life.

The Howard era is portrayed as a significant departure from the liberal and democratic heritage of modern Australia, into a postmodern time of confused relativism and irreconcilable social divisions. The first half of the book seeks to define Howard's politics as something new and dangerously different to the ideological precedents of the Liberal Party. The policies and rhetoric of Howard departed significantly from the Burkean conservatism and the 'middle-of-the-road' liberalism that the Liberal Party espoused at least up until the end of the Fraser government. Certainly, it is a facile argument to suggest that the ways in which Howard departed from Liberal Party traditions can be merely put down to pragmatism. As the title suggests, the times suited the Howard government and its politics were shaped by much more significant societal changes than mere events.

What makes the political argument so intriguing is the portrayal of Howard and the contemporary Australian right as 'postmodern'. Whilst the term by its very nature is a careless label that defines quite a divergent body of thought, the authors carefully place the New Right along the same spectrum as the relativistic and critical Left, the same postmodern 'elites' that were often the ire of Howard. The authors connect this New Right with the reactionary counter-Enlightenment thought of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Schmitt, who all bore an influence upon the late twentieth century development of postmodern philosophy. Definitive to this postmodern perspective is a profound scepticism of the modernists' universalistic worldview. The New Right

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accepts that there is a multiplicity of differing narratives in postmodern society. However, unlike the postmodern Left, the Right sees this as irreconcilable and divisive within a singular political society. In order to restrain this division, the New Right is increasingly willing to employ authoritarian and illiberal means to ward against the fragmentation of society and culture, contrarily in order to preserve its liberal democratic traditions. Whilst, the book illustrates this notion in great detail, citing the Tampa crisis, the 'culture wars' and so on, this initial framework and its significance are not entirely fleshed out beyond the politics of Howard. Nonetheless, the authors have identified and articulated an interesting trend on the Right that merits further discussion.

The sociological half of the book encounters an interesting contradiction in the approach of the Howard government. The authors contend that the Howard government's neoliberal agenda, specifically its economic reforms, created an atomistic and divided society that was contrary to its broadly religious and traditional conservative views. The authors cite a number of troubling trends within Australian society within the last quarter of a century and broadly claim that they are symptoms of a society that increasingly reflects what are seen as facets of a postmodern and atomistic society. Howard's 1996 election campaign was able to capitalize upon the cultural and social insecurities caused in part by the economic reforms of the Keating treasury, only to further perpetuate what the authors see as a radical transformation from the security of the Fordist economy. Boucher and Sharpe may be accused of mistaking association for causation at this point however, tying a diverse number of trends such as rising private debt, obesity, mental illness and divorce rates, to the period of neoliberal deregulation. Whilst their angle on this issue may well be true, so to could a number of other factors of which economic deregulation is just one example. At best, Howard is portrayed as having unwittingly perpetuated a cultural crisis that could only be resolved through radically illiberal and authoritarian means. At worst, his government deliberately manipulated these social insecurities for electoral ends.

However, at the heart of this sociological problem is the inherent, but not irreconcilable, tension between classical liberal ideology and conservatism. This is the certainly not a new dilemma and certainly not particular to the postmodern

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conservatives. Although within the historical context of the Liberal Party of Australia, this tension may have reached an apex during the Howard government's term, I would argue that the authors have overstated its peculiarity. In defence of the classical liberal and conservative amalgamation, I would argue that the strong community values of conservatism can act as a safeguard against the acute individualism and atomization of society that the neoliberal agenda seems to create and this is something that the popularity of the Howard government can be attributed. Regardless, the sense of social disintegration was certainly felt by the electorate and this was crucial to the success of Howard government.

*The Times Will Suit Them* appears to have two key purposes. Whilst succeeded convincingly in the first, it is the second more original notion that remains unfulfilled. The first is distinctly "anti-Howard", (p. ix) a comprehensive critique of the Howard government, its policies and ideology. Whilst they present a compelling argument in their favour, they tend to cover familiar ground, something that the authors would most likely acknowledge has been played out amongst academics and commentators before. To their credit, they have presented their argument in a comprehensive and original fashion, examining all aspects of the Howard era that made it so unique and definitive. However, it is this second element, the idea that Howard's New Right represents a postmodern break from its Burkean past, which is a far more intriguing prospect. Unfortunately the authors do not do their idea justice, leaving it ambivalently floating throughout the work. This does not detract however, from the appeal of the book and its inventive perspective on the contemporary history of the Howard era.

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**Supercapitalism:  
The Transformation of Business, Democracy, and Everyday Life**

*Robert Reich*  
*Melbourne: Scribe, 2008, 272pp. AUD \$32.95*

In the early years of the Clinton administration, at a time when the Japanese were suffering an economic recession brought on by a bubble in real estate, the US economy entered into a growth spurt that lasted more or less until the coming of George W. Bush. Today, 'the Clinton Boom' stands as the most sustained period of US peacetime growth in the whole of the twentieth century, outpacing 'the roaring twenties' by a reasonable margin. The trouble, however, was that it was hard to find any policy drivers at all for this expansion. Save for his adjustments to the system of welfare entitlements, there was very little that Clinton implemented which could be called fundamental, and even his welfare adjustments came too late in the boom to be regarded as causal.

The ending of the Clinton boom therefore brought on a sequence of books bearing titles that sought to penetrate the sense of amazement about this seemingly effortless American experience and its global context. The sequence began in 1999 when Edward Luttwak left behind his more normal concerns with strategy and geopolitics to write about *Turbo-Capitalism*, and was carried on four years later when Joseph Stiglitz left behind his World Bank years to write about *The Roaring Nineties*. And now Robert Reich, formerly Clinton's Secretary for Labor, gives us *Supercapitalism*.

As one would expect, Reich's book is the most political of the three, if politics is conceived in a relatively broad kind of way. His basic argument is that the triumph of free market capitalism has not been accompanied by any similar democratic success, where democracy is generously defined as the ability to make trade-offs between economic growth and non-economic social objectives such as equity or environmental sustainability. Capitalism has therefore yielded the triumph of 'the consumer as investor' but also its more malign handmaiden, the death of the citizen. His book explores the evolution of this one-sided victory, while never letting go of his central preoccupation with citizen-based measures that might be implemented to strengthen democracy.

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Reich concluded his research for this book in 2006, and he therefore missed out on what may well be the final chapter in this story of wonder and shame, the global financial crisis. For in the last two years, the most obvious of the many shortcomings of democracy has manifested itself right in the heart of Reich's supercapitalist economic engine. It exemplifies the main long-term problem with one-sided victories of the kind that Reich describes – that the negatives will eventually begin to consume the positives. Indeed, at the time of writing, and on top of the many failures associated with the sub-prime crisis, US regulatory authorities have seemingly not had the capacity to detect a multi-billion pyramid scheme operating out of Wall Street. Perhaps a new chapter on the failures of economic democracy could be grafted on to Reich's text. But perhaps not, since this book was otherwise keen to defend the institutions of supercapitalism. One way or another, his twelfth book will therefore be worth waiting for.

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