

All Things Human: Research in the Faculty of Arts

On 20 May 2003 a panel of speakers presented aspects of research presently being undertaken in the Faculty of Arts.

Associate Professor Robert van Krieken, Associate Dean for Research, introduced the panel. He provided an overview, supported by various graphs, of the quantitative measures of research performance over the period (1995–2001) for which data are available. The three categories of research activity used to assess performance are:

- Income gained in competitive research grants, primarily from the Australian Research Council.
- Publications (refereed journal articles, books, book chapters) recognised by the Department of Education, Science and Training.
- Postgraduate research: student load and completions.

He emphasised that the overall pattern is one where, in aggregate terms, the Faculty's performance has improved slightly over the period, which is a considerable achievement given the significant increase in teaching and administration loads. The Faculty is also the strongest performer in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. The most significant element in this position appears to be the steady increase in postgraduate completion rates, with a slight improvement in grant income. This has to be set against a slight but continuous decline in postgraduate research student load, however, and a steady decline in publication productivity. This suggests that our research student completions may start to decline in a few years, and, with declining publication productivity, so may our research income.

What these data predict is that in order to sustain our reputation as a Faculty that is strong in research, we will need to improve

both our publication output and our intake of postgraduate research students. Along with continuing to increase our grant income, these will be interesting challenges in the coming years.

Ms Katherine Albury, Honorary Research Associate in Gender Studies, described an Australian Research Council Discovery project undertaken jointly with Associate Professor Catherine Lumby (Media Studies) and Dr Alan McKee of the University of Queensland, 'Understanding Pornography in Australia'. Public debate about pornography has been fairly simple-minded: the less one knows about it, the more qualified one is to speak about it. There has been a great deal of public outrage about pornography but very little attention to its content or its modes of production. The project is to ask people who make, produce, distribute, and consume pornography in Australia what they think it is, what they like and dislike about it, and what they do with it. Three different but overlapping paths were being taken:

1. A survey of consumers of explicit texts by online anonymous survey, asking what people like and dislike; their age when they first looked at pornography; what other media forms they enjoy—what newspaper they read, who is their favourite novelist—and how these may inter-relate with pornography. There is a combination of simple questions and more open questions; and the possibility of longer, face to face interviews.

2. There is an empirical content analysis of X-rated videos, looking at what the content of an X-rated movie is. Is it more likely for a woman to have silicone-enhanced breasts? Is it more likely for the women to speak, or not? What is the kind of sex going on? What are the prevalent themes?

3. Her own interest was in home-made, or cottage industry pornography. In Australia, most of the fetish or non-mainstream material, and 90 per cent of the non-heterosexual material, is cottage industry, simply because it's too expensive to make a really good video here. Some of her research in this area was published last year (2002) in a book called *Yes Means Yes*. Associate Professor Catharine Lumby was also extending her

previous research on film classification by looking at particular cases where explicit sex occurs within something that would not have been considered a pornographic film, and how the debate played out about such films. She was also continuing to look at the categories of young people involved in the creation of adult material.

Diane Austin-Broos, Professor of Anthropology, spoke of independent projects and of a team project, first giving a brief account of her academic background. She had started in Philosophy, but came across the Black Panthers and power politics at the University of Chicago in the late 1960s, which made her aware of the fear in which people held each other and the way in which they related and responded to each other. This led her into Anthropology.

The first project was in Kingston, Jamaica; then in Central Australia over the last ten years. In Kingston downtown residents, often relatively recent migrants of peasant or working-class origins, were studied. In central Australia a group called the Western Arrernte was studied, a group particularly badly affected by the impact of settlement or partial settlement. They were 'missionised' by Lutherans for around 100 years. Her interest was not so much in the reproduction of tradition as in issues of change and socialisation; in particular, in the impact of market and transnational society on local populations. In theoretical orientation, she regarded herself as being something of a Weberian, interested in the relation between economic interests and ethos, value, what Weber called ethics; in how people who have had their social and economic order swept from under them go about reorienting and redefining themselves; in not so much a whole culture, as human beings as cultural beings; in how such people confer meaning and value on their lives again. She was interested in the conflict between kin-based and market-based society that Aboriginal people in Central Australia have to negotiate. She had also become interested in the issues of vernacular Christianity and the ways in which people coming out of other traditions interpret Christianity. This

was one case of what Weber calls world religions meeting the local, and what people do with those world religions when they are confronted with them.

A team project that had grown out of these interests over many years concerned race and racism, although the terms don't tell us very much. People can behave in a way we would call racist even though they don't have stereotyped beliefs. She had developed a framework of analysis that had to do with people interpreting social and cultural difference in terms of moral deviance or decadence, which she called the politics of moral order. As people struggled to reconstitute themselves in circumstances they certainly did not choose, other people seem to interpret their different courses as moral deviance or decadence. She had also an individual project, working on two anomalous economies: the welfare economy in Central Australia and the drug economy in Kingston, where there is no welfare system: two anomalous economies as sites of the politics of moral order, where people are seeking to find roots for themselves and other people are interpreting them as deviant or decadent.

The team project, which would draw on sociological policies and ethnographic expertise, would look at issues of migration, peripheralisation and the Australian state. In particular the aim was to compare the dynamics of migration and resource support among Aborigines on the one hand and regional populations in Melanesia and Southeast Asia on the other. For herself, it grew out of a suspicion about the theme of race, in that there's a lot of writing about how people imagine themselves; the team would like to bring together informed research on policy patterns over time, and how the people who are the objects of those policies are responding.

Dr Paolo Bartoloni, Director of International and Comparative Literary Studies, spoke first of the new teaching programme in his area, which began this year (2003) and looked to a cross-cultural and cross-literary major. The potential was strong, and the University has the knowledge and the commitment to become

an international leader in the field, which universities in Europe and Asia are interested in investigating. He hoped for a post-graduate programme in the future.

His own research interests were linked to this development, including a recent book on interstitiality and the complexity of a network of literary and philosophical references. Interstitiality meant not only literary themes but also the conditions arising for contemporary culture. Intermingled between the strong cultures of Italy and Australia, for example, are other languages and cultures. Time and again, he said, he returned to an Italian poem about identity, singularity and indistinction called 'False Directions'. His work on literature and cultural theory attempted to give answers to questions in the area.

Associate Professor Ghassan Hage said that his current Australian Research Council project was on the formation of transnational families. He had taken three villages in Lebanon, one in the north, an underdeveloped Christian village, one in central Lebanon which was a bit more developed and cosmopolitan, also Christian, and one village in south Lebanon which was a Shi'ia Muslim village. Each had very different marks of globalisation; the one in the north was mainly Venezuela, Philadelphia, and Sydney and Melbourne, the one in central Lebanon was mainly Paris, London, and New Bedford, and the third mainly Dubai, and Detroit. He had then considered one extended family from each village. The philosophical question was, how do people conceive of their human viability in relation to migration? He was interested in symbolic movements; even when people stay put, they are interested in where their lives are going, interested in securing the future. The important category here was that of hope; he was trying to make the concept of hope operational for the social sciences. When people say that their situation is hopeless, something is being said about society; and they may also be hopeful. He had, then, been linking a classical economy of distribution of goods and services with a kind of psychoanalysis in studying migration. How does society work as

a mechanism for the distribution of hope? Transnational families work as a mechanism for the distribution of opportunities for realising oneself in the world, and of confidence. One factor here was kinship labour, which is mainly communicative labour. One can study, for example, telephone bills, visits, intermarriage. Transnational families are increasingly crucial in an era of the decline of the nation state. They create more room for the mobility of people.

Professor Huw Price returned to Australia from Edinburgh as a Federation Fellow in Philosophy. His present project arose from the intersection of two very different interests.

The first interest was in philosophical pragmatism; asking about the function of philosophical concepts, such as truth or value or probability or causation, in human life. The contrast is with a more metaphysical approach, in asking a more anthropological question about a feature of human life or behaviour. The kinds of answers are different; and those differences are related to particular characteristics of the kinds of creatures—ourselves—who use these terms. It is obvious that the use of colour terms is related to the kind of colour vision we have; but there are deeper and more interesting cases to do with notions like truth and causation.

The second interest was in a different area, the philosophy of physics. Here there are two main starting points, both of which really lie within physics. The first is that the physical world is strikingly asymmetrical. For example, a hot cup of coffee will cool down while sitting on a table; the opposite does not happen. Such examples are all around us, and we don't ordinarily think of them as exceptional or calling for explanation. But the underlying physical laws are entirely even-handed with respect to the two dimensions of time; the cup of coffee heating up is thoroughly compatible with the laws of physics, but it never happens. It's as if we lived in a world in which there are no left hands, only right hands. There are real cases in which molecules are allowed to exist in both left-handed and right-handed forms but we only find them in, say, the left-handed form. It is very unclear what

the explanation is. We are so used to living in an asymmetric world that we tend to slip the answer we want into the explanation at the beginning, under the cover of some seemingly innocent assumption. The other starting point is in the problem of interpreting quantum mechanics. Quantum mechanics, first developed a little over 75 years ago, is often said on the one hand to be the most successful theory ever discovered by physics, for example in the predictions it is possible to make, to an accuracy of 11 or 12 decimal places; on the other hand, it is also the least understood theory ever produced. Nobody has any clear idea of what it is actually telling us about the world. There are profound paradoxes that arise. It pays to think very carefully about distinguishing what is really there in the world and what is merely a manifestation of our own perspective on the world. Our knowledge of the past and the future is very different; we tend to know things about the past but not about the future. We tend to think of the past as fixed and unchangeable, and of the future as open. But this is not a difference in the world; there is nothing in physics to support the idea. It is a matter of our attitude to the world.

Now, he said, we get to the point of connection between the two interests. In thinking in this way about how our own temporal perspective gets into the physics, we are thinking like a philosophical pragmatist. In particular we need to think about the way in which the kinds of concepts we use in describing the physical world depend on the way in which we are embedded in this asymmetric way in science. Then we can begin to think about what physics would be like if we could factor out this human, embedded in time, perspective. That is exactly what we need to do if we are to make progress with these problems in physics.

So that was what the project was all about: trying to examine some of the conceptual foundations of physics, especially with relation to its temporal aspect, in order to understand the kinds of notion used in those foundations. This was a small step in the kind of journey science and philosophy have been taking together at least since the seventeenth century: disentangling the objective and the subjective threads in our view of the world. What is going

on at each step of this journey is an attempt to pick out the subjective threads so we have a clearer idea of what is there in the world independently of us. Some of the famous names in the seventeenth century, people like Galileo, were intimately involved in this sort of project. Notions like causation, which involve the subjective temporal perspective, are another kind of step in that process. Those issues are of great philosophical interest in themselves but they will have an additional bonus in helping us to understand the particular kind of puzzles that presently exist concerning the interpretation of quantum mechanics.