



Australian
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HISTORY AND AUTHORITY: POLITICAL VOCABULARIES OF THE MODERN AGE

27-29 July 2016

China in the World Building
(#188), Fellows Lane,
Australian National University

Presented by the Humanities
Research Centre

ANU College of
Arts & Social
Sciences

The Victorian historian Edward Freeman famously remarked: 'History is past politics, and politics present history.' Freeman's aphorism still rings true, not least in an era that strikes many as an uncanny replay of the nineteenth century. Inequality is on the rise alongside rampant technological advancement. Radical proposals for political transformation vie for media attention alongside military adventurism and terrorist violence. The language of crisis permeates the public domain. It may be that such similarities between

past and present are more apparent than real. Nevertheless, our language for discussing political action and conflict appears to be thoroughly conditioned by an inherited set of terms and concepts that emerged during the early modern period, coalesced around the time of the French Revolution, and ultimately took root over the long nineteenth century. Such language is not simply descriptive, but thoroughly normative, as debates over the legitimacy of political acts invariably take the form of arguments over the



applicability of certain terms. What's the difference between a refugee and a migrant? How can we be sure that what we're witnessing is a revolution and not an insurgency? Or rather, a civil war? If 'socialism' is no longer a term of abuse in Western politics, what is the significance of its renewed appeal?

The aim of this conference is to critically interrogate the ways in which inherited vocabularies shape political life – both in the past and the present. As appeals to the authority of the past are increasingly deployed to legitimize or delegitimize political conflict, we are interested in exploring the historicity of these sorts of political representations in a dual sense: as particular manifestations of politics in action, but also as a function of the way artists, writers, and historians figure such conflicts. The positions of 'left' and 'right' are often taken for granted, for instance, but they have a history. So too do the figures of revolution, human rights, and democracy, not to mention the most basic lexicons of race, gender, and class. As we struggle to make sense of such terms and to use them effectively, their past usage is our primary resource.

The conference will feature papers from students and scholars across the humanities and social sciences, including intellectual historians, literary scholars, political theorists, art historians and others keen to debate the historical character of political discourse and the political character of historical representation—past, present, and future.

Keynote speakers

Professor Peter Hallward, Kingston University (UK)

Associate Professor Alison Ross, Monash University

Conference registration

To register, please visit
hrc.anu.edu.au/events/history-and-authority

Conference program

A conference program is available at
bit.ly/powerHRC

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