HOPE

new philosophies for change

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'On The Side of Life' – Joy and the Capacity of Being
A conversation with Ghassan Hage

We live in cultures where security and comfort are seen as the motifs for the betterment of life and happiness. You have a home, a car, a job, and you earn more and more to make that house your comfort zone. No-one or no thing can come between you and the security you seek in this form of cultural belonging. Yet, in the era of late capitalism, these hopes are increasingly less able to be fulfilled. Instability at work, instability in social relations, and cultural mobility make the dream home an imagined resting place. In this view of the world the reality of our being and living becomes part of limited definitions of social and cultural exchange. We want more money, more success to protect ourselves from the threat *of insecurity. If we extend the home to our national visions of unity and economic security, those who enter it may be unwanted guests and threats to our homely comforts. In this view of hope our lives are subsumed by a deferral of gratification – the hope for things to come in cultural, aesthetic or monetary terms – visions of life that make all hospitality a cultural risk. What, then, might be an ethics of hope, a hope not based on threat and deferral? How might it relate to joy as another kind of contentment – the affirmation of life as it emerges and in the transitions and movements of our everyday life and relationships?*

Sydney-based anthropologist Ghassan Hage and I reflect on these relations of hope, and how, within capitalism itself, hope is not evenly distributed amongst the population. The effect of this unevenness is a complex mix of envy, guilt and resentment that becomes established in communities – in the formation of identities and across ethnic, social and class lines – both real and imagined. In this dialogue we explore what it means to belong to a community and to feel at home, where migrants and 'natives' experience belonging, ideas of security, comfort and hospitality in immediate and daily ways. The political consequences of these experiences are apparent across the globe, and what we need is to find ways to hope differently. It is the ethical responsibility of intellectuals to understand how hope aligns with politics, and what directions can be possible for affirming hope in anti-capitalist and joyful ways.

Ghassan Hage's writings on 'whiteness' and ideas of being and belonging have been influential in contemporary political debates on how we might understand national identities and political economies – the tensions, hopes and concerns for building new philosophies that are on the side of life.

The distribution of hope

Mary: We often think about hope in positive ways – as the 'good' or some future ideal to work toward, but hope may mean many different things in our everyday understanding of happiness or in the field of politics. I'd like to start by asking you about these hopes.

Ghassan: Hope is a word that usually has such positive significations, and when I use it I worry that people might think that I am necessarily talking about a positive condition. But hope can be positive or negative. In philosophy there is a tradition from Spinoza to Nietzsche that sees hope negatively. In this tradition hope is equated too often with 'religious hope' in the sense of Karl Marx's 'opium of the people'. Here hope becomes a negation or a deferral of life. In Spinoza you also get a sense of hope as the absence of the pursuit of joy. Instead of living an ethic of joy, we live an ethic of hope, and that becomes an ethic of deferring joy which fits in very much with the idea of saving and deferring gratification. This is similar to the thesis developed later by Henri Marcuse about enjoyment being subjected to the logic of capitalism – you suffer now in the hope you might enjoy later without this enjoyment really every arriving. This is the kind of hope which, as Nietzsche saw it, was against life.

But there is also a hope which is on the side of life, so to speak. There is the hope associated with Spinoza's endeavours which is like a bodily principle of hope, which drives us to continue to want to live, no matter what. And there is also the hope associated with what Pierre Bourdieu calls *illusio* – the existence of something to live for, what gives life a meaning,

which again, to continue the intellectual connections, is not dissimilar to Jacques Lacan's understanding of the 'constituting fantasy'.

So in approaching existence from a perspective of hope we get a very ambivalent ethics of happiness. That's why we need to look at what kind of hope a society encourages rather than simply whether it gives people hope or not. In relation to capitalism this allows for a triple critique. First, we can argue that capitalism reduces the ethic of joy to an ethic of hope and deferral, and we can criticise this in the name of a long-term political aim, reinstating an ethic of joy. Second, we can also adopt a critical attitude to the ideologies of hope that capitalism encourages, and which reduce hope to dreams of upward social mobility. But, thirdly, we can also adopt a short-term critical perspective. We begin by accepting whatever hope capitalism has to offer, but as a next step we argue that capitalism does not even manage to distribute this kind of truncated hope evenly amongst the population. So not only does it withhold joy, but it actually doesn't even give hope to people in an equal manner. So this distribution of hope becomes the politics of the immediate but, at the same time, if you just concentrate on the question of the distribution of hope you lose sight of the fact that there is a greater ethic in life, the ethic of joy, which is the basis of a far more radical critique of capitalism.

What, then, would this ethic of joy involve?

Well, for Spinoza, joy comes from a simple change to the *better* in the state of the body. That is, it is an experience of reaching a higher stage in the capacities to act, associate and deploy oneself in or with one's environment which constitutes us as a specific 'thing' in Spinoza's language. So joy is not the experience of a static state of being, no matter how 'high' that state is. Joy is the experience of a growth from one state of being to a more efficient one *as it is happening*. It is the experience of that quantum leap of the body, of the self as it is moving into a higher capacity to act. Importantly, for Spinoza, we are capable of reaching even greater joyful leaps when we combine communally with others. Sadness is the opposite. So from a prescriptive perspective (that sounds awful!) we can say that we are aiming for a society

which allows us to communally maximise the experience of this quantum leap. I think this idea of an 'increase' in being, but only at an individual level, is also found in Bourdieu's notion of the *accumulation* of capital.

So joy involves the capacity to experience life as a transition and movement in one's own state of being, because it is not premised on the deferral of gratification or a future-oriented project or plan. It is an affirmative state of existence. Can you explain how this links with the idea of the accumulation of capital – what are you precisely getting at here?

Bourdieu notes somewhere that he sees human beings as motivated by the need to accumulate 'being'. In this understanding of the human there is a core criticism of most philosophies of being encapsulated by Shakespeare's 'To be or not to be, that is the question'. Bourdieu is saying precisely that to be or not to be is *not* the question, because for him being is not an either/or question. People don't either have being or not have it, people are constantly striving to accumulate being. Some people are scraping the bottom of the barrel to get a bit of being in life. So being is not equally distributed, if you like, amongst the population. Now, for Bourdieu, symbolic capital is that socially specific thing that people accumulate and from which they derive being. In *Pascalian Meditations* he talks of the accumulation of symbolic capital as the accumulation of *raisons d'être* – the accumulation of reasons to live. Each person accumulates whatever gives them a buzz in life, but what they choose is determined by their circumstances – that's ultimately what capital is for Bourdieu. Furthermore, capitals are specific to the fields in which they are valued – the more you accumulate the more you become capable of operating efficiently in that field. It's in this sense that I've established a connection between Bourdieu's notion of accumulation and Spinoza's notion of joy.

As you say, hope and 'being' are not evenly distributed amongst the population, and this directly links to the loss of hope that is experienced by people in a nation. You have written about 'whiteness' and how the category itself needs to be investigated to understand the crisis of identity that has happened in Australia, and elsewhere, which has led to new types

of nationalism and racism. I think in your book White Nation *you were starting to develop the relationship between this loss and the loss of hope. So when we talk about hope not being evenly distributed, what does that crisis of loss entail for a country like Australia?*

Well, let's go into whiteness a bit first, would that be the best way to move into it?

Yes.

I must say now when I reflect on *White Nation* I think that whiteness is not as satisfactorily dealt with in the book as I would have liked to have dealt with it, given its importance for the whole work. Many of the issues people have publicly or privately raised with me in relation to whiteness showed a misunderstanding of what I was aiming for, and I feel that it is I who has created that space for misunderstanding, I think. I should have insisted a lot more on the specificity of colonial whiteness. That is, what does it mean to talk about a whiteness that is a specific historical product of colonialism? Some of the historical writings on whiteness today have shown how, in the precolonial era, forms of white identification existed on many continents – in the Arab world and China, for example. European colonialism monopolised whiteness; that is, it shrunk the geography of whiteness and made it an entirely European attribute. But the other important point that needs to be emphasised here is the association of whiteness with colonial/European civilisation. Being white did not make everyone civilised, but it made every white European think that they had the *capacity* to be civilised. So whiteness works like a kind of imaginary bank account that you have but you can't access, but *you* are happy to have this bank account because ultimately you think that *you* can access it.

More capital?

Exactly. More capital. More being. More hope. We can say in a Bourdieuian fashion that the accumulation of whiteness allowed for the accumulation of more colonial being. So what happens is that the colonial project has led to a move away from class as the principle for the distribution of the 'hope to

be civilised' and replaced it with 'race'. For instance, if you look at England and France, the recipients of what we call today 'racist thinking' were always the working classes. They were the people conceived of as innately unable to access civilisation 'by their very nature'. So, being working-class or being part of the masses meant that you were conceived of as a bad breed and there was nothing that could be done about it – no hope of ever becoming civilised. Now notice the change that happens with colonialism and the shifting from class to race – suddenly those French and English working class, who according to their previously conceived class identity had no hope of accessing civilisation, became primarily French or British 'whites' and gained with it the 'hope of access'. Here we have the hope principle at its best – being white did not make you immediately 'highly civilised', it just gave you access to the possibility, it interpellated you as someone who could try and be highly civilised. The economic state of deprivation you're now in as a white national mightn't have changed much from when you were considered as inherently uncivilised, but at least your whiteness gave you hope of a better life. The no-hopers, those who by definition could not access colonial civilisation, the ones who couldn't and shouldn't even bother to try, were now the blacks!

But what is interesting today is that, I think, we are witnessing a return to class as the principle for the distribution of this *capacity* to be civilised. One of the most important phenomena that we are witnessing is the cultural pluralism among the middle classes and the upper classes which has meant that race as a principle for the distribution of the 'hope to be civilised' is no longer as functional to capitalism as it used to be. As many have argued, global capitalism promotes and is promoted by a kind of 'multicultural civilisation'. Many white working class are seeing themselves as unable to access this civilisation. On the other hand, there are too many black people, Asian people and other Third-World-looking people – as I call them – who are starting to have access to the goodies we associate with civilisation. These include aesthetic goods, such as being spunky, appearing nicely on the camera etc, and economic goods, being an investor and what have you.

If you look at Asian people in Australia today there is a division between three categories. There is first the category of the 'spunky Asians', the ones who feature in corporate advertisings. There is the category of the 'Asian investors', who are welcomed as migrants. And finally there is the category of the 'Asian piece-worker'. This is one category of Asians that is starting to be completely marginalised, even if not especially within multicultural discourse! – even though this remains a very fundamental reality in Australia. So we are seeing class being the determining criterion for your inclusion in global multiculturalism. Now a similar process is happening amongst white people; that is, it is the working class who are being increasingly denied access to the *capacity* to multicultural civilisation. So maybe we can say that multicultural capitalism is leading to processes of deracialisation of whiteness, and the reintroduction of class as the mechanism for the distribution of the hope to be civilised in the era of globalisation.

In the Asian example your use of the three kinds of categories – the spunky Asian, the investor-type Asian and then the worker in a sweat-shop or factory situation – opens out another form of class analysis. What you are pointing to seems to be class not within a dominant/minority model, or the ruling class/working split, but within ethnic cultures themselves, and the ways they are presented. The struggles of class mobility within an ethnic culture become also, to use a word of yours, 'worrying' and that's what is interesting me now: class in all of its transmutations. So how do we begin to untangle some of these issues within communities? For instance, in a family you can have different entry and exit points in the distribution of hope, and that is class related. Often children of migrants experience hope and class quite differently from their parents...

Well, I think your question is very interesting itself because 15 years ago someone might have said, 'Okay, you are talking about all this class stuff, we know all that; let's talk about identity'. I think it captures something which is very much part of what I consciously see as I move into reintroducing political economy – and, more importantly, *critical* political economy – back into the analysis of identity, because a very large chunk of work on identity

in the last 20 years or so has often been done without a solid empirical grounding. So in a sense your question talks to my most dominant fantasy at the moment, which is to create an anthropology which combines critical political economy, psychoanalysis and philosophical issues, and fuse them together in looking at the questions of identification and hope. And I think that the need to introduce class is partly the product of the 'historical conjuncture', as we used to say.

At one level there is always a need to introduce class. I mean it is not that class happened 20 years ago and disappeared for 10 years and it has come back again. I think what has gone and come back is more the culture and the consciousness of class and the academic awareness of the importance of class that went with them. So here, I think, I am straightforwardly being the product of my time. When people were more conscious of their own class identity I was a class analyst. And when people stopped valorising it I stopped being a class analyst, and now that they have become conscious of class again I've returned to it. So maybe the real heroes were people who were struggling all along with trying to maintain the importance of class as an analytical category...

It is precisely those questions that I skimmed over when I was looking at identity, and when I came to the end of my book Foreign Dialogues *I realised this was a primary question that was underlying the issues. I realised I had to address it in my own life because I live between classes in a sense – between my parents' working-class life and my 'educated class' – and then within a more cultural sphere, of being a 'public' intellectual and not being part of a university structure. So where do you place yourself? There are so many different class relations there and I think that's why I want to keep working at, I suppose, becoming conscious of class again – the historical and social conditions that have changed how we understand it. Are you suggesting another kind of class consciousness here?*

I am not sure. I know that as far as I am concerned, my own class consciousness involves consciousness of my own specificity as an academic and the position of academics within the capitalist class structures, and the

ethical responsibilities such an ambivalently privileged position entails. So one of the things that is becoming obvious to me today is that, if you are a social scientist and remain blind to the processes of class exploitation that are happening around you, there is something unethical about it. To keep talking about repressed and marginalised identities, difference, and what have you, can lock you in a middle-class struggle of identity affirmation at the very time when, because of the way capitalism is developing, the difficulties and miseries that people are encountering in life because of their class position have become so much more important than the miseries of identity and misrepresentation – or, even in a more complex way, they emerge within the miseries of identity and misrepresentation. Now, to be clear, this does not mean that the move of critical theory into the analysis of identity is something that should be regretted. It has given us an immensely useful body of concepts and insights. But I fear that many of us have somehow retreated from a confrontation with a critique of capitalism, and facilitated the dominance of the rampant neo-liberal ideology we are witnessing today.

So there is a need to reintroduce an intellectual counter-hegemonic resistance to *capitalism* (not to 'modernity' or 'post-modernity' or 'post-colonialism')... or rather, we need to join with those who have been doing this work of resistance in the 'Western underground' and in the Third World. I don't like to grade intellectual work too much and say 'This analysis is more important than that one', but I ultimately would say class analysis is more urgent today. Most people are beyond worrying about being classified as silly dogmatic Marxists. But I would probably go further: I'd say that I'd rather be classified as a dogmatic Marxist than as someone who is only interested in 'identity politics'. As always, the best is to try and combine the two tendencies.

Yes. It is important to understand the workings of identity as part of analysing the accumulation of being in capitalism and new class formations...

Yes. Approaching class from the perspective of 'being' can have important ramifications on notions of class struggle, for instance. It invites us to understand what 'being' a member of a class is. Whether being a member of the upper class or the working class, it is still about a human mode of being – a being with its hopes, envies, weaknesses and all sorts of things like that. So it invites us not to fall into associating being in an economically exploited position with being virtuous. It would help us to refuse to idealise victims and deposit in them 'the good', whether they are the working class or subjugated racial subjects – just because life is tough for them doesn't mean they are 'good'. I mean, you can be under the thumb and be a very nasty human being. So the perspective from the angle of identity and being can help us de-moralise a bit the analysis of class exploitation.

Sure, sure. And, I guess, there is a real need to analyse the relations of envy and resentment in relation to that subjugation. This involves understanding the conditions that make people want to cling to identities (which you point to in the discussion of whiteness) and the hope that is invested in them within a capitalist system...

Yes... exactly.

How long can we stay for dinner?

I think in your work, and certainly over the last 10 years that I've come across it, you've been very much concerned with addressing, as we have already discussed, the question of being. That is, what it is to live *and* be, *almost in an existential sense. And, connected to this, what it is to be at 'home' or not at home in a place and how this idea of 'homeliness' is related to a notion of community. In a way I now find 'identity' a very annoying and narrowing term for understanding those experiences. In fact, I think the concept of being, and what you were saying earlier about Spinoza, is a much richer way of talking about the human capacity for living and existence.*

Richer than what?

Richer than an idea of just identity. I think being evokes a broader sense of life – not just a metaphysical one, but how through the constitution of language and thought we come to understand what it means to be human, and that, to me, is hope.

I'm not sure I would oppose the two terms. I don't think you are either. I think that identity is a kind of relation to or consciousness of being. I think it is the most manifest part of being when it comes to listening to people speaking in an interview, for example. Unlike academics in the humanities, social scientists, in the sense of people whose work involves empirical investigations of social phenomena, have often shied away from fuzzy concepts such as being – what on earth *do* you research when you are doing empirical research about being? So the question was left in the hands of philosophers. But I totally agree with Bourdieu that philosophers are much better at asking the difficult questions than at actually working them through – because they work them at the level of ideas, rather than through empirical research. So I think that there must be 'a sociology and an anthropology of being' or 'a sociology and an anthropology of hope', because such a mode of investigation would raise questions that can only be answered – insofar as they can be answered – empirically. Part of my own research project on migration at the moment is to try and operationalise (sorry about such an awful word) notions such as being. The notion of homeliness comes in handy here, because I think it provides a key, and an attempt to find categories with which you can empirically start studying something like the pursuit of being.

What being at home might mean?

What it *does* mean. Immediately when you speak about the pursuit of homeliness, even though we are still into fuzzy, vague terms, we've come down a bit more tangibly from the pursuit of being – and suddenly the imagination starts working on something more concrete depending on the image...

Of the home...

And what it is, and in itself that's an interesting empirical project – for instance, the different images of home that come to people's minds as soon they are speaking about or unconsciously thinking about homeliness. So, yes, I think part of my project here is to refine the breaking down of homeliness into various aspects like familiarity, community, security and hope.

Yes, it means learning to feel uncomfortable with 'comfort' or contentment – intellectual or otherwise – and the hopes that we can so actively take for granted within capitalism. You know, what is familiar, secure, hopeful, really needs to be explored through a variety of experiences...

Yes. I am trying to give homely imaginaries a more socio-historically specific content – for instance, in relation to our discussion on hope. It is clear that homeliness and hope are related, but not in the same way for everyone. For Lebanese economic migrants, for example, whose conceptions of homeliness are highly affected by the economic imperative which has defined their lives as migrants, homeliness and hope are clearly structured around the capitalist logic of upward social mobility. But I was very intrigued when interviewing an old Lebanese peasant last year. I noted that he had a disposition towards contentment (without any of the romanticisations that the concept invites) around which his whole 'homeliness' was structured. I felt that such a disposition was so thoroughly anti-migrant and anti-capitalist. It made me think that one of the most important radical tasks of creative intellectuals today is to try and think of modes of hoping differently. We talk a lot about cultural difference these days, but really I feel that capitalism has integrated all cultural differences so thoroughly that I haven't met many people who *hoped differently* in the middle of all this cultural difference.

So in the pursuit of homeliness and your work on community there is an important relationship between how you feel at home or not at home, and how you perceive yourself in a community. Can you give me an example of that concrete work and the relationship to a community or fantasy of a community... Is that too big?

An example?

Yes, I guess there are too many examples...

Well, the sense of community is clearly a sense of articulation to others, concretely speaking – the feeling of connection, of sharing, or recognition. Homeliness comes from all this. But, as we mentioned earlier in relation to Spinoza, homeliness is also achieved when individual bodies can actually find a more useful and better pursuit for joy in combination with other bodies. So this combination of bodies itself, even in its physical sense, has a basis for thinking the importance of the homeliness of communities. Benedict Anderson's idea of 'imagined communities' has rightly been considered an important innovation in thinking about communities in general. But paradoxically, it seems to have limited our imagination as far as how we think of communities. After all, communities are not just imagined; they are also so many bodies relating to each other. They are a practical ensemble of relations between people that one uses as a support in the pursuit of being. So being part of a community provides a very important objective and subjective gratification for people. That's what *feeling* part of a community, as opposed to just imagining, can convey. It is objective in the sense that you want to be part of a community only if you feel you are capable of achieving more by being part of it than you can on your own – and subjective in that you kind of 'take on' the greatness of so many more people when you are living in a community. Like I, as an individual, am hopeless at cricket, but that doesn't stop me from feeling that 'we', Australians, are brilliant at it. Because 'community' can do so much for you, you develop a sense of owing it when it actually does. You want to give it something in return.

There is no doubt that this can be seen in doing research on migration – where there is a constant question around the need for communality – which is part and parcel of the process of immigration, emigration, and of leaving and of settling. I can't help but think here that in my experience (and this is something which people haven't worked on much, I think) there is an incredible element of guilt that accompanies the process of migration, when people leave their societies while feeling that they owe them something. In migration, especially under the era of capitalism and colonialism, there is a transformation of the self into a *homo economicus* at the expense of a *homo moralis*. For instance, the classical 'economic migrants' – regardless of what they experience – are people who say, 'I'm gonna kiss my communal life good-bye in the aim of pursuing economic success'. And here we come to this issue of hope, because there is always an element of deferred gratification when the migrants say, 'I'll just give my communal life a miss for a while so I can make some money, and then I'll come back home and enjoy life in my community'.

In my ethnographic work I'm always very sensitive to the desire for community expressed by migrants. Often it is a desire that oozes guilt for having left a communal life for the pursuit of an economic life. For instance, in many interviews people say to me, 'You can't make friends here like you can in the old country; it's different'. I have noted that this concern for friendship is, at another level, a kind of transference of the guilt for having given up friendship for economic pursuit. And, as a matter of fact, most people never experience good friendship. The image of a good friendship will remain as part of those 'back home fantasies' where deep human relations are imagined to still happen. I think the principle of communality which is working here is through the presence of an ideal, and its practical absence is heightened by the process of migration.

I mean guilt, yes. In the sense I am understanding what you are saying in relation to economic pursuit – transferring yourself into a better life, economically, and that's certainly the history of my family, although it never worked. They are not any kind of economic success story. So I suppose it is about the question of the loss of hope or loss of the capacity to feel connected – but it is not just guilt, though. It is also about a certain dream that went wrong or something.

Oh no, it's not just guilt at all, I agree. I think it is also very important to say that guilt will vary from one person to the next, and the extent to which it is experienced, if it is experienced at all. And that's something which is interesting me a lot at the moment – the ambivalent feelings that the migrant has towards their home country. I feel sometimes that I'm trying to develop a notion of 'centripetal envy'. This is the fantasy of belonging to a society which

pulls you in, a society that keeps you. Now what I mean here is the migrant leaves home and wants to idealise the home but, at the same time, it's the home that has failed to keep them – and so, here, the home is thought of as the 'mother with the bad breast'. On one hand I want to love my mother but on the other hand, my mother is not feeding me, *damn it*, she's pushed me out! I'm under a centrifugal force and I land somewhere among people who are *in* and so I envy my hosts. My host is someone whose mother has kept them – I hate them for it. One wonders to what extent the racism of the host can be sometimes the most wonderful thing that could happen to the migrant, psychologically speaking. It provides them with a good reason to hate people they already hate for a 'bad' reason. There is something very relieving about finding a good excuse to hate someone you already hate. Which doesn't mean that the person who is racist is less racist or does not deserve to be hated but, at the same time... just as well he's there!

Well, I just think how many times I've heard that in my family and I suppose you would have heard it too. In my experience it was all about the Australians not being up to scratch. So, growing up, it was all about Australians as the other, the people who were really being hostile, not inviting, that kind of thing...

Poor migrants! We're really getting stuck into them, aren't we? I'm a bit uncomfortable – we'll have to start bashing white Australians soon or I'll feel bad...! But no, you're right. I have seen this happening in my recent work on the migrant discourses about the Aboriginal question. The discourse is that the Anglos have stolen the land from the Aboriginal people, right? Now that's also a wonderful event from a migrant perspective, because it enables them to say, 'I don't owe you white people anything. You didn't give me anything in the first place; you stole that land – Why are you telling me that you have accepted me on your land? You're bastards, thieves, killers, etc'. And I think even among the politically correct migrant – who joined in with the 'we must apologise to indigenous Australians' – there is an extra element of *jouissance* that oozes in. It's good to see the history of the whities catching up with them!

That raises the important question about the relationship between migrant discourses and indigenous issues. It does become problematic if they are basing the discourse on an apology from somebody that, as you say, has already done them wrong. So, in a way, they are not addressing their own questions to indigenous and other communities, using your idea of spatial logic. They are not going across or moving in horizontal fashion to the communities where they are living – they are looking at the host as the problem... But let's go to the question about the host – to the country that takes in guests. Clearly a notion of invitation involves a certain fantasy of unconditionality – but we all know that this is not the case for migrants and refugees. So how does a community work in relationship to the host country?

The very idea of 'host' is already ideologically loaded – most people who call themselves hosts have never issued any invitation, as far as I know. So I think the discourse of host often allows some people to have *fantasies of control*. The very idea of hosting, welcoming, etc, assumes a certain control. Now there are some people who have power to welcome and decide how many migrants come in, but the thing is, they are not the people who get the most mileage out of discourse of 'we are the hosts' and 'one should be able to decide who comes into one's home'. I don't think those who use the host language most have much control over anything really; they just fantasise about it. And the discourse of the host is linked also with the discourse of the guest, and there might be something therapeutic about the notion of host/guest in the sense that it allows for an imaginary transitional moment after which everyone goes 'home'.

Like at a dinner party?

Well yes, I think that's precisely it. The dinner ends – that's what so nice about it! The guests eat and leave. They just don't stay on and on and on! How much can one eat and party in one evening – there's a limit!

That's the problem – the guest keeps on staying. Well, they've been invited to stay but they have really outstayed their welcome in this scenario...

Yes, 'guest' is a very time-dependent concept, and I think that is why it becomes so problematic when used in relation to migration, because it often exceeds its time. When it exceeds its time it becomes a category that brings out the very contradictions it is trying to hide. For what is true about hosts is true about guests – if you're living somewhere that you consider somebody else's home, how long are you going to keep on wanting to relate to the owner as the host? If your stay extends long enough you start feeling at home despite yourself; you might also become a rapacious human being despite yourself, claiming the house as simply your own. There is something about our humanity which cannot allow us to live in a guest-/host-dependent relationship beyond a certain time. In the process of migration I think that is what happens. On the one hand migrants themselves, by the very nature of their length of stay, can no longer find it in them to act as guests, and the host easily becomes an irrelevant category. And at the same time the host will start seeing the migrant as trespassing rather than as a guest – and this is often where the tension emanates from.

But this is an ideological tension because, as I said, most of the people who see themselves as hosts are not in a position to host much in the first place. To host, to offer refuge, is part of an economy of 'giving hope'. But not many people really have that much hope to give. That's why you have such a strong support for the government's anti-refugee stance. People are so short on hope – neo-liberalism excludes them from the networks where hope is circulating; they become refugees in their own country... the refugees of the interior.

This relates to the distribution of hope, class and the loss of whiteness that we discussed earlier. Those who have fantasies of control are often in a precarious social and political position, and this forms resentment and projects it onto the outsider, whether it is the migrant or the state of refugees in Australia. So there is a vital link between these fantasies and the attitudes that dominate how the national debates are staged in this country. Which is also, I guess, a broader question around 'hospitality'...

Exactly.

The materiality of being

All the issues discussed raise ethical questions. As you've said yourself, the ethical role of the intellectual involves understanding how humans struggle to maintain a certain viability in the world. How does this ethic, and trying to understand cultural and political experiences, impact on what you see as the responsibility of intellectuals?

It is always very difficult to talk about this because I often find myself being put in a kind of priestly position... or putting myself in it, really. And this is not by pure chance, because I think there is a priestly element in the intellectual disposition. And even though I am a secular intellectual there is something attractive about it which I do like. Let me give as an example something that always stuck in my mind following the massacre that Martin Bryant committed in Tasmania. Of course when he did that he was evil incarnate. But there was this fantastic moment when a priest went to see him and listened to him. This priest did not define him as 'evil' as everyone was doing at the time, and he did not use any concept of what Martin Bryant was or wasn't; he simply listened to him. Now for me this is something very similar to the role of the intellectuals. In society there are already people categorising things as good or evil. To be clear, it's not a question of arguing that the people who do this shouldn't be doing it – I am not saying that at all. They ought to be and this is how society works – if someone commits something which is asocial we condemn them. But I think that there are some people who have a role to *not* enter that game, and it is the role of the intellectuals. So it is not a substitute role for the people who try to fight struggles, and it is not the role which aims to be critical of the people who fight struggles in the name of justice, etc, etc. But it is simply that function which can add an important ethical dimension to these *struggles as they are fought*. It won't stop them and it's ridiculous to assume that it would, because it is unrealistic to think that intellectuals have such a power – but it is simply what they can do.

It is a question of evaluating what difference does intellectual work make to life in general, given the limited capacity it has to influence social life. My position comes from – I like to think – a very materialist evaluation

of the capacity of intellectual products to have an impact on the social world, which is again inherited from Bourdieu. (Now I am going to have a hard time convincing people that I am capable of original thoughts!)

That materialism is also about the kind of work you do, isn't it? Which is very much empirically based with conversations, and uses your own life experience and that sort of thing. Is that how you are defining materialism, in a sense: the critical tools that can be brought to intellectual work and the 'everyday'?

That's definitely part of it, but it is also simply a question of an almost anatomical look at intellectual work. For instance, I want to follow my book physically as it is moving – to find out where is it landing, in whose hands, how many hands, how many minds, how does it circulate? It is a total physical approach to see what the sphere of influence is, once it has landed somewhere. And I think it's minimal. One of the greatest illusions we intellectuals have – and we don't like to believe it – is how minimal the impact of our work is. And it is because of the minimality of this impact, or rather it is because we don't want to face it, that we fall back into the total fantasy of omnipotence of thought.

It is this illusion that is necessary to face, and that's why the relationship between intellectual work and life experience often breaks open that sense of omnipotence. I want to ask you in more detail about how much of living in Lebanon and through a civil war, and then coming to Australia and being an intellectual here and so on, have framed your own sense of self and informed your critical work?

Yes, of course those experiences have informed my critical work. You may have noticed in *White Nation* that the instinctive part of my writing was attacking Hansonites' usage of metaphors of civil war in Australia. You know, when Pauline Hanson asked rhetorically, 'Do you want civil war?', that really shitted me! I think that people who talk about war and civil war, etc, in such a vacuous manner are often insulting to the ear of someone who has walked on a ground where blood was still dripping.

Because no-one who has seen war can imagine it as a useful fantasy in any possible way and play little stupid language games with it – it is your worst possible nightmare. And I think the idea of playing with the concept of war can only emanate from people who haven't got a single idea of what violence means. And this is also my problem with spunky revolutionaries who attack me for dismissing violence as such, and they say, 'What about revolutionary violence or something like this?' To me they are all part of the same breed. And perhaps the belief that violence is a means to something else frees them from the fact that they have not experienced violence, and that frees them to think of it, and good luck to them. So whether it is for a revolutionary liberational mode or whatever, I am not going to join in. I can't join. This is one important way that the civil war has shaped my life and ethical position.

Another important aspect, specifically in regard to Lebanon, is my understanding of cultural pluralism. Often in Australia, despite the fact that we have so many Lebanese here, the cultural and social commentary remains limited. For instance, the former Commissioner of Police comments about the 'Lebanese' and 'Middle Eastern-looking people'. In this commentary there is a slotting into the public mind of Lebanon as some kind of backward-looking Third World country, and there is nothing there, etc. But what people forget is that Lebanon was a culturally pluralist nation. I grew up with Muslims and Christians, and it was difficult but there were people struggling to keep Lebanon pluralist all the time. So my experience of Lebanon has given me a sensitivity, and a keen eye to spot people who proclaim realities which become self-realising prophecies – such as people who say, 'Whenever you have cultural difference you will end up having a war'. To me, people like this are actively plotting for war. Statements like this are what set up part of this process, because cultural pluralism does not lead to anything. Cultural pluralism is something you struggle to maintain like anything else in life. It is not a given: it does not sit there for you, it does not produce magical realities, but it does not produce hell either. You work on it. So because I saw Lebanon turn from such a pluralist country into a war situation, I am a very good spotter of

people who aim to create social tension under the guise of wanting to preserve national unity, and all those sorts of things. Of course when you talk about the influence of migration there are many areas that one discovers, but these are the two that immediately come to mind now. I don't think that my experience of migration itself helped me understand migration in general.

Really?

No, I think it positioned me in a good place to be able to look at migration, but I came to Australia from Lebanon in the mid-70s as a student, not as someone looking for work, and I very quickly moved into Anglo-Celtic student circles, through friendship... and marriage!

But there would have been fractures in your life, though? You would have experienced a different mode of being in terms of your relationship to Lebanon and Australia. You would have had to invent a new kind of relationship?

No, no, that is always an interesting question – this question of crossing borders and experiencing migration. Now I never experienced myself as migrating to Australia. I experienced myself as a university student who in Lebanon was interested mainly in jazz rock and spunky women (Frank Zappa rules!) and all I felt was, 'Here I am now living in Sydney; let's hope I can still continue engaging in these same deeply intellectual pursuits'. I never uttered the word: I have 'migrated' to Australia. I always thought 'I am living in Australia'. Later in my research I became very aware that this was a common experience for middle-class people rich in economic and educational capital. The richer you are in those capitals, the more cosmopolitan you are, and the more you experience the world as your turf. You meet other people like you and you never ask where have you 'migrated to'. You only ask, where are you living now? 'I'm living in New York, I'm living in Sydney'. And that's what I used to think: 'I'm living in Sydney'.

Well, that's interesting. It comes back to the question of class and how it is experienced. If you have access to cultural capital, and are in a certain position

when you do migrate, then your access to power is quite different from somebody who doesn't have those entry points. I mean, from my experience, the fractures and pain of living across cultures has been very strong – we never had access to power and we didn't have a privileged class position.

Yes, there's no doubt this is something important. It is also worth remembering that Sydney is essentially a working-class city as far as migration is concerned. I actually lost consciousness of this until recently when I went back to Beirut and someone I knew from my teenage years asked me where I was living, and I answered Australia, and he looked astonished and said: 'What! You are in *Estrohliyo*?' By saying *Estrohliyo* this person was affecting a northern Lebanese peasant accent, and what was meant by the comment was 'How the hell did you end up in Australia? – only Lebanese peasants end up in Australia'. By the way, it was because of my personal history that I ended up in Sydney – my mother spent most of her life here before she went to Lebanon to marry my father and stay. But her family (my maternal grandparents and my uncles and aunts) all stayed here in Australia.

Anyway, so I didn't have a common trajectory for people like me. Most of my friends were in the Paris, London, New York triangle. And I think that this experience put me in an uneasy location *vis-à-vis* Australia and *vis-à-vis* the Lebanese community in Australia. But I also think that it allowed me a certain intellectual lucidity around issues of class, privilege and cultural difference.

An ethics of joy

Well, one last thing. Is it joyous communities or hopeful communities that we aim for? I mean, what might be a hopeful and maybe a joyous community?

Joyful community, ultimately, I think. But as we are talking it seems to me that maybe we shouldn't oppose joy and hope, but think of joy as that particularly positive variant of hope that is 'on the side of life'. Otherwise, hope as the deferral of joy becomes a variant of *ressentiment* – a surrender to the logic of deferral, masquerading as a higher ethics used to justify the non-pursuit of joy. Maybe, until the revolution, we should aim for the possibility of affirming a joyful hope, a hope that emerges from a refusal of the capitalist logic of deferral, and derives joy from that very refusal.