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Episode 43: Ghassan Hage and the Weight of Words

Ghassan Hage and the Weight of Words

VOICEOVER

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JACKY ANGUS

Hello and welcome to Up Close, coming to you from Melbourne University, Australia. I'm Jacky Angus. My guest today is Ghassan Hage, recently appointed as Future Generation Professor in the School of Philosophy, Anthropology and Social Inquiry, here at the University of Melbourne. One of Prof Hage's goals in his new appointment has been to promote a more innovative spirit among academics to increase inter-disciplinary collaboration in any one area of research. This interconnectedness of ideas and social issues indicates the breadth of Prof Hage's own intellectual interests and publications. These have variously addressed social theory in relation to racism, ethnicity and citizenship, migration and multiculturalism, national identity in a globalising world, and the generation of hope during times of rapid social change. Welcome to Up Close, Prof Hage.

GHASSAN HAGE

Thank you.

JACKY ANGUS

Given this rich choice of ideas for discussion, my first question concerns your current research interest: how to develop a culture of negotiation, as the basis for better social relations? How does this differ from other models of interaction? Such as, simply recognising differences among people that exemplifies most models of multiculturalism?

GHASSAN HAGE

Well, I think, we can start from a very simple observation, and that is that

?recognition? or the verb ?to recognise? always involves a recogniser and a recognised. While, to negotiate does not involve ?a negotiator? and ?a negotiated?. It involves another negotiator. And this means that any negotiation, involves recognising the person you are dealing with or the group you are dealing with as a subject, not as an object. And I think this is quite important because this has been increasingly the limit of the paradigm of recognition on which multiculturalism has been based.

JACKY ANGUS

Does that mean we need to re-explore maybe even reconfigure the notion of multiculturalism to make it more flexible, perhaps?

GHASSAN HAGE

Sure. I think that multiculturalism today is in an unusual situation where we need to re-affirm it because it is important to recognise the diversity in which we exist. But at the same time, too many people re-affirm it in a claustrophobic way, defensively. And don't want to deal with its shortcomings. So, I think it is important to re-affirm, but to also to transcend it. You know these commonalities, among all multiculturalisms in the world, there is no doubt for instance, that all western states, started having issues related to multiculturalism at the same time. Also, all western states today are having the same issues in relation to, for instance, the Islamic question. There are questions, that are transnational about multiculturalism. But at the same time, each nation has developed its own specificity. The U.S. is much more, what we might call, an identity multiculturalism. It dominates much more in the universities. In Australia, we have a very unique situation, where multiculturalism has developed hand in hand with social-economic issues because it was driven by struggles of migrant workers and so the right for cultural difference came hand in hand with the right for economic equality among ethnic workers. And that is even more so unique to Australia than in Canada, which is kind of like in between the American and the Australian models. And, I think in that sense, it makes Australian multiculturalism, a much more structural and deeper proposition.

JACKY ANGUS

I'm thinking of the Netherlands which I gather recently has had some problems with its model of multiculturalism.

GHASSAN HAGE

I think the problems people are facing with multiculturalism, especially with the example of the Netherlands is where we see the limits of a politics of recognition. And the need to engage in negotiation. I mean, many Muslims, especially second generation Muslims that I have encountered in my own research, they are not very happy with the idea ?to be recognised?. I mean, if someone comes and says to them, ?oh, I appreciate and value your culture.? They'll say to them, ?well, good for you, but I don't care. I don't want my presence in society to be dependent on you thinking that I'm groovy. I want to stay and be in the society because I exist in this society, full stop. And so, I want you to treat me as an equal not as something valuable. I'd rather you treat me as valueless, but as equal and less debated rather

than think of me as some kind of jewel but also as an object.?

JACKY ANGUS

So, in this situation, where does negotiation come and how would you actually implement the model of negotiation?

GHASSAN HAGE

Well, I'm an academic so I don't pretend to have all the practical answers. All I'm saying is that the disposition towards negotiation might involve something which answers two important shortcomings that exist in multiculturalism today. The first shortcoming is the need of the cultural others, the ethnicized minorities or sometimes not so minorities to be seen as subjects, as participants in the making of society. Not just as something you like or dislike or tolerate or not tolerate. But the second important thing about negotiation is that it forces the minorities to be engaging in some form or another of accommodation with the dominant culture. I mean, one of the problems with the paradigm of recognition is that it says, the dominant culture has to be understanding towards, let's say, Chinese immigrants. Well, what's wrong with the Chinese? What's their problem? Why can't they be understanding too? Why does understanding have to be from the dominant to the dominated? I mean, they don't lack intelligence or anything.

JACKY ANGUS

It shouldn't be one way traffic.

GHASSAN HAGE

And so, the solution of negotiation allows for much more mutual, more accommodating each other. This term, 'accommodation' is increasingly being used in the Canadian, especially in Quebec. Where they have the policy of what they call 'accomodement raisonnable', which is 'reasonable accommodation'. And the idea is that to accommodate yourself with the other, if you find it reasonable enough. So, this idea of 'reasonable', I like it because it is not one way traffic. It involves human judgement and negotiation. What is reasonable? What is not reasonable? But it involves also 'or rather, it must involve that the minorities themselves also engage in reasonable accommodation.

JACKY ANGUS

You're listening to Up Close, from University of Melbourne, Australia. This is Jacky Angus and I'm talking to Prof Ghassan Hage. I'd like to turn now to your idea of hope, Professor, as an important social value. I note that in your writings, the social process of generating hope in the public domain is seen as increasingly under threat. This you say is because of resurgent capitalism of the transnational market is encouraging unbridled consumerism and that, to quote you, 'hope becomes scarce in such a society.' Can you explain what you mean by that?

GHASSAN HAGE

Well, I am using here, a very specific term, which is 'social hope'. And 'social hope' is something which I define as linked to a sense of mobility -

JACKY ANGUS

- of going somewhere.

GHASSAN HAGE

Of going somewhere. What I call, existential mobility. As opposed to physical mobility. Most languages equate between well-being and mobility. You say, 'how are you going?' You don't ask people, 'how are you staying still?' Because you want to give a sense that there is movement and movement is good. And so, this idea of mobility is what I want to equate with hope. Because I think one of the most dominant experiences of late, is the experience of stuckedness.

JACKY ANGUS

Being stuck.

GHASSAN HAGE

People feel stuck. There is even heroism of stuckedness that has emerged. If you think there was a time where we used to equate heroism with climbing mountains etcetera, one of the more dominant forms of heroism today is related to people who survive earthquakes, who survive all kinds of things, and we celebrate them. For instance, 'We found this person! He was under the rubble for five days! What a wonderful thing.' So, what has this person done? Well, not much really. He just got stuck. Well, he survived. Stuckedness. So, stuckedness is a form of heroism, and I think it is the heroism of our era because increasingly many of us feel stuck. Even we could be doing well in our job, and say, 'I'm stuck in this job. I need another job.' Or, 'I'm stuck in this position. I need another position.' So, hope is when society is capable of giving you a sense of movement.

JACKY ANGUS

So, when you say that the nexus between the nation state as a social organisation and capitalism is weakening in favour of multinational and transnational capitalism, you mean that that actually deprives people of a sense of being able to move on? How do you link those things?

GHASSAN HAGE

Well, I think statistics show clearly that we increasingly experience our jobs as being precarious, we increasingly have a sense that we have no room to move, we increasingly feel that we are snowed under. All these metaphors that people use? I take them seriously. I think these metaphors indicate an existential trauma that comes from the intensification of work under capitalism and the primacy of neo-liberal economics.

JACKY ANGUS

Now, you say that transnationalism now is in a sense is threatening the nation state and that the nation state was somehow able to encourage social hope albeit perhaps differentially, not necessarily equally. So, the situation, because we've got a global situation and global economics, this makes people feel more confused, more fragmented or simply it is impractical for the nation state to operate in the same way.

GHASSAN HAGE

I think the nation state is no longer capable of operating in the same way because the nation state on the whole exists as an ideological formation, rather than as a structural formation. What I mean by this is that, there was a time where you could speak of nation states as built on a solid national economy. Today, the notion of a national economy is increasingly brittle. Before, if people sort of like, just had a job they felt they were part of the nation state. No one had to say to them, 'believe you are part of Australia?' or 'believe you are part of Belgium?' or 'believe you are part of this or that state?'. It was just the mere fact of having a job, maybe belonging to a union etcetera. Now you can be in a job, but think 'that doesn't give me any national belonging.' That is why we see increasingly the state wants to interfere in the production of nationalist ideologies. Because these nationalist ideologies have become much more important in securing the adherence of citizens to the nation state.

JACKY ANGUS

But, if we've got a global situation, surely the transnationalism of multinationals and the whole economic aspect, global economics, means that it is a different ball game all together, isn't it? I mean, where do you get your sense of identity from, as you're saying, you mightn't get it from your job but there are also other factors and there is an alternative desire for communities and communications that are different. There is also nostalgic desire for safety. How do we deal with all of these issues together, in the pot?

GHASSAN HAGE

I feel that it is important to remember that words, ideas, they don't have the same weight across history and across nations. I'll give you a pretty graphic example. For one year, in 2004, I was visiting professor at the American University of Beirut, and I got to meet this Syrian dissident journalist, who used to regularly go to jail in Syria for writing what was considered as subversive material. And he was in Beirut, and in Beirut you have a kind of laissez fair writing by default, because no one can afford basically to be a dictator in Beirut, so you have democracy by default, and you can say whatever you want. And so, I was part of this conversation and this man asked this Syrian writer, he said, 'you must enjoy the fact that you are now in Beirut and you can write whatever you want without people harrassing you.' He said, 'yeah, freedom of speech is very nice, but I have to say, I miss being in Syria because when I used to write something in Syria and they used to arrest me they used to make me feel that my words were very important.' Here I write something and everyone says, 'well, you can say whatever you like.' But it actually meant that, that nobody thought that my words were important. So, freedom of speech can involve the notion of freedom which is like the market notion of freedom because it is valueless, it is available. Words sort of like circulate and so the weight of words differs from one society to another. And I think we are moving in the west now increasingly to a situation where words are becoming far more important than they used to be. This is why we have culture wars. I mean, academics, like me, used to have a kind of like free space to say whatever we like it was as if the people in power had vacated the cultural domain for us, they didn't care: 'okay, go on, say whatever

you like, we don't care because we hold power.? But now we have culture war, now they say ?now we care about what you are saying. We want to fight you.?

JACKY ANGUS

And why is that?

GHASSAN HAGE

Because what is being said has acquired a far greater importance. Not the actual content, the words themselves, the role of ideology, all of these are increasingly becoming important to secure the adhesion of citizens to the state in the absence of this structural thing which used to be the economy.

JACKY ANGUS

If we can return to national identity for a moment, as you note the assertion of national identity and nationalism itself can become defensive, even paranoid, so how do we deal with this need for safety as we face a global society with its more ambiguous notions of belonging and the rise of paranoid nationalism?

GHASSAN HAGE

Well, I think it is quite important for identities to be experienced as a space of safety. The notion of safety is quite liberating, it is not always paranoid. If you watch a toddler playing in a park with a carer, they go play, in a playground a little bit maybe, but come back touch their parent and go back. And actually you will find inevitably parents will cuddle them for a bit too long and you find them gesticulating saying ?leave me, I just came to get a little cuddle I don't want you to suffocate me. I just want to go back and play. I don't want to stay here in this embrace.? And this is identity. Identity is not something that we want to sit in and let it suffocate us. It is something we just like to touch; it is there for us and the purpose of a secure identity is to allow us to move on in the world. When we sit in our identity in a claustrophobic manner, obviously it links up with what we were talking about before. This idea that we are suffering from a crisis of mobility. There is nowhere to go. And so, increasingly identity becomes a space where we are creating boundaries protecting ourselves, but these identities become claustrophobic. There is such a thing as a difference between a relaxed mode of identification, even relaxed form of nationalism and anxious nationalism.

JACKY ANGUS

There is a bit of anxiety around, isn't there about nationalism in various parts of the world today for whatever reason and I've noticed that you've written about the aggressive, assertive, over-assertive form of nationalism. I'm interested I suppose in how would one resolve that at the social level in a democratic society such as our own?

GHASSAN HAGE

There will always be sections of the population that have an anxious form of identification and there will be sections that will be relaxed. Often it is related to social class and to education. If you are cosmopolitan you're more easy going, if

you're well-to-do you're more easy going, if you feel you are going places you are more easy going. Look at racism. Racism often takes the form of comparative movement. If you look at people who become jealous of their immigrant neighbour, they might have a Holden and the immigrant came and when they arrived they had a bike, and two months ago, they just bought a motorbike. Notice how racism works? It is not that the motorbike is better than my car, it is just that last year I had a car, and this year I still have the same car, while my neighbour he started with a bike and now he has a motorbike. So, you see a movement, while I am stuck. And so, I worry. And this comparative movement is the basis of a lot of racism that you find in Australia but everywhere else in the world. And that is what I think links up to anxious versus non-anxious nationalism.

JACKY ANGUS

You're listening to Up Close at the University of Melbourne, Australia. I'm Jacky Angus and I'm talking to Prof Ghassan Hage. Finally I would like to explore your ideas about 'elites'. You are known for your sharp criticism of political elites and the unequal power basis from which they operate. That they impose their view of reality, as it were. You regard intellectual elites, and I quote you here, 'as creating openings and cracks in the process of domination'. Furthermore you say that 'the mark of the democratic state is the extent to which it freely allows its intellectuals this autonomous role of critic'. But isn't it the same for intellectuals? Aren't they too caught up with the same human struggle for dominance and competitiveness, even bullying of others in the public domain? After all intellectuals are shaped by the same societies as politicians.

GHASSAN HAGE

I'm sure that intellectuals exhibit all kinds of weaknesses that all human beings exhibit. It is not even beyond me to think they're even much worse because of their lack of practical engagement in the world. I think that it is important to recognise in places like Australia and France where the state is financing the universities, I think there is an element in which the state is financing people to get stuck into them. And I think it is quite crucial index of how democratic a state is, this willingness to finance someone to get stuck into you.

JACKY ANGUS

The capacity to tolerate dissent.

GHASSAN HAGE

Not just 'tolerate dissent', but you're actually paying for it. You are sponsoring people to get stuck into you. Now, I think it is the duty of academics, not to fall into a logic of politics.

JACKY ANGUS

Which is what?

GHASSAN HAGE

The logic of politics is often the logic of friend and enemy. If you want to do politics,

you have to stop at one stage and say 'this is where I stand. If you're not with me, you are against me. I have to take decisions.' Politics is about decision making. Now, academics have this luxury of not having to take decisions, so as I would argue, the ethical duty to not let anyone stand and take a position comfortably. If the politician comes to say 'this is where I stand?', the academic says, 'yeah, but there are problems with where you are standing.'

JACKY ANGUS

So, it is a constant challenge ? it is a dialectic in a sense.

GHASSAN HAGE

You cannot support a group uncritically. So, if the Muslims are being oppressed by the dominant culture, if you are an academic, it is not the same as being an advocate for the Muslim community. An advocate for the Muslim community would say 'I am standing, supporting the Muslim community.' If you are an academic you say 'yes, I am standing for the Muslim community, given that they are being oppressed, but look at your problems. Just because you are a victim doesn't make you wonderful. You've got all kinds of problems yourself.' It is impossible to stop critical questioning, that is why it is a different ethic and, it is being a pain, really, as a profession. Profession being a pain in the butt for people.

JACKY ANGUS

So intellectuals are shaped by the same society as the politicians, so what should we expect of the public intellectual, even in a political situation?

GHASSAN HAGE

I think we need to expect a highly ethical person. I think we need to expect someone who doesn't get seduced by public talking and therefore assume the role of expert on everything. Someone who is willing to give back the power of expertise and that you should back up your views by hard labour, rather than by easy presentation.

JACKY ANGUS

Well, on that positive note, Prof Hage, thank you very much for being on Up Close today.

GHASSAN HAGE

Thank you for having me.

JACKY ANGUS

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University Up Close is created by Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param. I'm Jacky Angus, until next time, thank you for joining us on Up Close. Goodbye.

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