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"You're on the list!" Writing the Australian Italian experience of war-time internment

John Gatt-Rutter

(La Trobe University and Italian Australian Institute)

ABSTRACT

This paper compares the discursive and experiential valence of the two fullest autobiographical accounts of internment written by Australian Italians, that by Claudio Alcorso in *The Wind You Say* (1993) and that by Peter Dalseno (1994), both of whom were in Loveday from 1942 to 1944 (while Alcorso had been in Hay from June 1940). Beyond the shock of unmerited deprivation of liberty and the equally unmerited stigma of being defined as "enemy aliens", the experience of, and discourse on, internment of the two turns out very different, despite the relative closeness in age when detained. For Alcorso, a patrician from Rome, the internment experience is one of opening up to and enamourment with the world and with life – the Australian outback, working-class and other Australian Italians, human creativity – and the worst crisis comes with release. For Dalseno's *alter ego*, Peter Delano, raised in the Ingham area, the initial shock is worst, denying him his hard won Australian identity component, and internment represents an intensification of the sordidness of life outside, while release brings with it reacceptance into the wider Australian society. This study thus shows the diversity of ways in which a common history is experienced and discursively conveyed by individuals.

"You're on the list!" This, as recounted in Peter Dalseno's lightly fictionalised autobiography, *Sugar, Tears and Eyeties* (Dalseno 1994: 192), was the new greeting that circulated among the Italians of the Herbert River sugar-cane district of North Queensland, around Ingham, when Italy's entry into the Second World War in June 1940 triggered the internment of resident Italians at the behest of Army Intelligence. Dalseno casts his narrative in the third person and calls his protagonist Peter Delano. Other personal names and factual details have also been changed. This is a transparent disguise and distancing device, a bridle on subjectivity, and of itself does not make Dalseno's

account any less reliable or 'truthful'.[1] *Sugar, Tears and Eyeties* is securely moored to its historical context, both global and local, history as experienced by the ordinary individual. "Singular voices" feed into that collective construct which we call history, and Davis, Aurell and Delgado, introducing a volume of essays on *Ethnic Life Writing and Histories*, offer a rich discussion of the "mediation" between those two terms flagged in its title, and, following Rosenstone, suggest that "The reality of the past does not lie in a collection of data but in an accumulation of stories" (Davis, Aurell and Delgado 2007: 10-11). This paper attempts to gauge the discursive and experiential valence of two differently crafted, written and published autobiographies by Claudio Alcorso and Peter Dalseno, both published half a century after the events described, which contain the fullest personal records of internment written by Italian Australians.[2]

The Prologue of Claudio Alcorso's autobiography, *The Wind You Say*, signals its reflexive and introspective character: "when I closed my eyes to let recollections emerge, the images that emerged were always related to emotions", and the first of these emotional images is "the dreadful first sight of Long Bay Gaol", in Sydney, where he was taken immediately upon his being detained, soon after Italy's entry into the war in June 1940 (Alcorso 1993:2). Alcorso's chapter on his internment is foregrounded by coming first, before and outside the loosely chronological sequence followed in the rest of the book.[3] The traumatic memory of that sordid first day and night of incarceration is indelible, and Alcorso describes the venereal diseases section of the prison to which he is consigned, with "grimy nets" slung outside the windows at every level to forestall attempts at suicide leaps.

> I sat on the cot bewildered and overcome by revulsion. I had seen this type of gaol in American movies […] but now that I was inside a real one, the impact was very different from watching a movie. The vision of people condemned to spend years inside those cells was too desperate to contemplate (1993:5-6).

Alcorso observes that most of the Italians arrested held no political views and "migrated to Australia to try to evade the class bondage into which they were born" (1993:6-7). Alcorso himself, before being interned, had attempted to join the Royal Australian Air Force in his enthusiasm to fight Nazi-Fascism (1993:7), having done military service in Italy as a fighter pilot. A native of Rome, he was a free-thinking Catholic from a wealthy and cultured family of Jewish descent (1993:52-53), who had

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[1] Dalseno's Preface dwells on his having opted for "preciseness" over "praise" or "flattery" (Dalseno 1994: v), while declaring "I have taken licence […] to substitute names, locality and in some cases omit a specific appendage to an event, for the sake of camouflage" (Dalseno 1994: vii).

[2] On the history of internment of Italians in Australia, see: Alcorso and Alcorso 1992; Bosworth and Ugolini 1992; Elkner, Martinuzzi O'Brien, Rando and Cappello 2005; O'Connor 1996; Rando 2005b. See also Gatt-Rutter 2006; Bonutto 1962, 1994; Lucchesi 2002, 2008. For broader historical treatments of the internment of enemy aliens in Australia during the Second World War, see Bevege 1993; Neumann 2006; Trinca (ed.) 2008.

[3] This chapter repeats and develops a portion of the chapter "Italians in Australia during World War II" (Alcorso and Alcorso 1992).

come to Australia in 1937 at the age of twenty-four with a Master’s degree from the London School of Economics and industrial know-how, good connections, and financial backing in textile design and production, as he recounts in his second chapter. When arrested, he was on the brink of a promising business career. He dwells on the laughably flimsy evidence that led to his internment – an abundance of French and Swiss hotel labels on his suitcases and a few pro-Fascist publications in his well-filled multilingual bookcase (1993:8), this ‘evidence’ being subsequently put on display as part of the Sydney exhibition purporting to demonstrate the existence of a ‘Fifth Column’ of German and Italian secret agents seeking to undermine security in Australia (1993:9). Alcorso makes the case that there was no juridical evidence justifying his internment, but that Army Intelligence consistently overrode the appeal judges, apparently on the basis that an educated Italian was a potential danger, and all the more so if wealthy or influential.[4]

Internment for Alcorso proved to be a key formative experience, a key chapter in that *Bildungsroman* which is his autobiography, a falling in love. Through internment, the bourgeois city-dweller from Rome discovers the Australian outback and the world of nature, he discovers the Italian working class and Marxism-Leninism, he discovers oriental religion, he even learns to read Pushkin’s poetry in Russian. His acquaintance with the Australian landscape begins with the train journey out of Sydney to the Hay internment camp in outback New South Wales: “As first light appeared I looked outside the train’s window to see a perfectly flat, almost treeless plain. I had never seen such a landscape. Nothing indicated human activity or presence. It looked eerie, limitless, hostile” (1993:10-11). Later, when he ended up in the Loveday complex, beside the river Murray a few hundred kilometres north-east of Adelaide in South Australia, where all internees were eventually concentrated, he developed an intimate relationship with that landscape through being engaged in tree-felling outside the camp, a skill he acquired by working with Italian internees from north Queensland. He records having learned to swing an axe from Giovanni Villanova (1993:25). He feelingly describes the Murray landscape, and writes: “I loved the beautiful straight gums. I ran my hand on the smooth bark, as if to caress the tree to be felled” (1993:26). He reflects retrospectively: “I did not know that the bush had started to talk to me, and that I looked at the big river as a companion. I did not know that I had commenced to love this land.” The outdoor work lent itself to a bucolic idyll: “At lunchtime we swam in the river and caught fish in primitive cages” (1993:25). And he recapitulates at the start of the following chapter:

> Despite the squalor and hatreds of the camp, the routine of going out to cut timber on the uninhabited, beautiful sunny banks of the Murray together with people I had come to love, had become an oasis of warmth, a protective cocoon (1993:34).

[4] It is beyond the scope of this paper to ascertain the degree of Claudio Alcorso’s commitment in favour of or against Fascism at any given point in time before or after his move to Australia, though the second chapter of *The Wind You Say* presents a picture of marked disaffection with the regime from the beginning of the 1930s and leading up to his emigration. Italy’s race laws of 1938, victimising Italians of Jewish descent, must have undoubtedly precipitated this process.

While in captivity, Alcorso gets to know many people whom he was to "come to love", beginning with the first Italian camp leader at Hay, Prince Alfonso Del Drago, who (Alcorso surmises) proved not to be a sufficiently enthusiastic Fascist for some of the internees and was physically attacked one dark night (1993:12). Another was Phil Bossone, an industrial worker from Genoa, whose vegetable patch at Hay out-performed those of the interned professional market gardeners. Phil had been recycling the contents of the latrines to fertilize his crops (1993:13). He was an outspoken communist and had enjoyed the solidarity of his Australian fellow workers before he was interned. Alcorso struck up a lifelong friendship with him. "My discussions with Phil Bossone left me disoriented. It was my first encounter with a militant worker". This was to lead Alcorso, when he was later moved to Loveday, to become friendly with a more intellectually inclined German communist, Herman Behrens, and to read Lenin (1993:14-15).

Alcorso's sociability excluded only hard-line Fascists and Nazis: "Confinement leads to familiarity […] Now I knew virtually every man in my new community." He names Italo Rossi as another lifelong friend whom he met at Hay; and his future father-in-law, Ned Zavattaro, previously a gold-miner in Papua New Guinea, as two among many (1993:15) and singles out Enrico Piombo, a former anarchist turned follower of the Indian guru Krishnamurti, who introduced Alcorso to his ideas of "wholeness" and "global interrelationship" (1993:17). Alcorso conceived a collective admiration for his Italian fellow-internees. He admired the skill they revealed at wood-carving and clay-modelling: "unsuspected creativity emerged […] a portent perhaps of the resources latent in most human beings, given time and opportunity", endorsing an insight which he gathered from reading Colin Ward decades later: "'the artist is not a special type of person. Every person is, or could be, a special kind of artist'" (1993:17-18). After the move to Loveday in 1942, Alcorso's admiration and affection was to extend to the cane-cutters and farmers from Ingham, Mareeba and Stanthorpe in Queensland and from Griffith in New South Wales whom he met there:

> I came to feel that I knew Ingham well, even though I had never been there. […] I listened to how tobacco grew at Mareeba, and fruit at Stanthorpe. I heard tales from the irrigation farms and the vineyards around Griffith. The people who had worked on the land had more to say than the city greengrocer or the terrazzo worker. Behind their talk there was love for the land; through their talk I started to perceive unsuspected aspects of life in Australia (1993:31-2).

And he observes: "they leaned towards anti-fascism almost naturally" (1993:32).

Yet this is the man that Peter Dalseno, himself from Ingham, taxes with aloofness and *lack* of sociability:

> The only exception was found in the Italian Jew. There were two such Jews in the camp, and they were brothers. They were fluent in English – obviously domiciled in Australia for some length of time. Tall of body, fair of complexion, their body movements suggested much athletic preoccupation. They were masters in the art of segregation. They mixed with no one, restricted their conversation to

> matters of import and guarded the privacy of their lives. They could afford to do so. Massive wealth simplified their attitude (Dalseno 1994:245).

The apparent discrepancy may be attributed to the fact that Dalseno’s *alter ego* in his narrative, there called Peter Delano, was camp secretary, and therefore inevitably seen (however wrongly) as being associated with the camp’s internal Italian Fascist hierarchy. It is therefore understandable that the Alcorso should have kept their distance from him. Alcorso claims that Army Intelligence put Fascists in charge of the Italian internees (Alcorso 1993:23).

Alcorso mentions, among various non-Italians in the camp, the ‘Australia First’ anti-British internees, of Irish descent (1993:26-7), and the aristocratic Arnold von Skerst, a descendant of the Teutonic Knights from Riga, who turns against Nazism when Germany attacks Russia, and who teaches Alcorso to read Pushkin’s poetry in Russian (1993:27). Meanwhile, Alcorso records, the Fascist leaders within the camp, when the war was going well for the Axis Powers, bragged of the compensation they would receive for their internment when the war was over, but turned vindictive when the tide of war swung against them (1993:28). It was in this atmosphere that, on 16 November 1942, Francesco Fantin, an anti-Fascist, was murdered in the Loveday camp. Alcorso half a century later discovered a rough English translation of Fantin’s diary *Pensieri e Ricordi*, more poetic than political in tone and content: “Reading Fantin’s diary the vision of the camp reappeared before me. I shuddered recalling the atmosphere of hatred, of fear, mounting in the camp as the tide of war turned” (1993:30). Dr Piscitelli, the Fascist camp leader, alleged the death to have been accidental, but Dr Muggia, the camp medical officer, and a Jew (for whom Claudio Alcorso worked as an orderly), considered that the evidence proved that Fantin had been deliberately murdered. The Fascist leaders whispered: “Those who speak will die; there are six more communists to be killed.” (The Fascists described all their opponents as communists, even if, as in Fantin’s case, they were not) (1993:29).

The Alcorso brothers appealed against their internment, and their case was heard in Sydney in February 1941. The tribunal dismissed the evidence against them and recommended their release, but this was vetoed by Army Intelligence, despite affidavits in their favour from leading Italian anti-Fascists in the United States – Arturo Toscanini, Max Ascoli, and Randolfo Pacciardi. The Army’s position was that the war was a conflict between nationalities and not between ideologies (1993:21-22). Release did not come until three years later, and with it, for Claudio, the experience of radical estrangement, conveyed by the narrative equivalent of a cinematic dissolve.

This comes at the beginning of Alcorso’s second chapter, which states his total lack of recall of the period from his departure from Loveday, his rehabilitation at Adelaide, and the first few weeks after his return to Sydney. “I must have acted like a robot,” he surmises:

> A cold feeling of anxiety crept up inside me, mixed with bitter hatred for the faceless men who controlled my life. […] The self-confidence, the optimism of pre-war Claudio Alcorso had vanished. Now I was 9221; my internment number had not been tattooed on my

> skin but it was deeply engraved in my psyche. I was conscious of my accent and that it would lead to questions the moment I opened my mouth. It meant that anyone I talked to would classify me as an enemy alien. The feeling of being outside of the real world, the apprehension that made me feel cold all the time, remained with me for weeks and weeks (Alcorso 1993:34-5).

The narrative dissolve is sparked off by seeing Sydney as the opposite of the beautiful 'dreamtime' vision of arrival in the harbour seven years earlier: "My perceptions of time and place remained confused, as they do in dreams. The sight of George Street triggered visions of my native city, Rome" (1993:35). This leads in to the chronological reconstruction, in the second chapter, of Alcorso's previous life from early childhood through adolescence to early adulthood. The subsequent chapters pick up the narrative of Alcorso's life experience after internment. But the traumatic centrality of the internment experience is reiterated in Alcorso's brief Epilogue, which suggests: "But there may be something to be learned from my wartime experience, namely the evil of racism and the need to ensure that the rulings of our courts of justice are supreme" (1993:168); and declares: "My love for freedom means that I am capable of feeling hatred for those who would destroy it" (1993:170).

Peter Dalseno, on the last page of *Sugar, Tears and Eyeties*, his narrative of the formative years of his autobiographical *alter ego* Peter Delano, sheds his lightly fictionalised persona and assumes that of judgemental author and ex-internee who has had the relatively uninhibited conversation with other Italian ex-internees that academic researchers such as Rando (2005b) had found it difficult to entertain:

> There are no more internees [...] But, it is interesting to listen to the comments of those who were and who are still alive today. The boastful eulogises the "paradise" enjoyed as a prisoner. The conservative calls for an apology and a recognition that internment was not necessarily the result of his political views. Unfortunately, neither attracts acknowledgement. In the first instance, the veneer of bravado is varnished with the smear of stupidity; in the second instance, the claim is ignorant of the penalties of war – wages, unmindful of discrimination and devoid of explanation (Dalseno 1994:280).

All four extended accounts of the internment experience (those by Bonutto, Alcorso and Dalseno/Delano, and Lucchesi's work on Joe Maffina) are very much "a story of political innocents hurt by a vindictive wartime state" (cf. Elkner 2005:11) and the issue at stake is indeed the quality of justice involved and the grossness of the criteria discriminating between belonging and not-belonging (particularly in the cases of those Australian Italians who had been naturalised as British subjects or who were British subjects by virtue of having been born in Australia). Dalseno's book devotes the last ten chapters (from 17 to 26), amounting to ninety pages out of 280, to the internment experience, making it the culminating point of the *Bildungsroman* of his central

character, Peter Delano, which is itself the central component of the book and supplies its connecting narrative thread.

Dalseno's independence is flagged from the very first words of his Preface: "The foregoing (*recte* following) pages are factual!" (Dalseno 1994:v). It is elaborated on the following page: "I must apologise to my co-nationals for exposing some of the uncongenial qualities of our character"(1994:vi).[5] And it is borne out by his recounting, in the third person, both unsavoury and heart-warming episodes of his story as that of a member of a broad social community comprising first the Italians, and those connected with them, of the Herbert River sugar-growing area around Ingham in northern Queensland, and then some of the same individuals, among many others, held in the Loveday internment camp between March 1942 and February 1944. *Sugar, Tears and Eyeties* is therefore at once autobiography and social chronicle, firmly inserted in the history of the Queensland Italians and of the Second World War.

Fears and uncertainties about internment arise among the Italians as Italy enters the war in June 1940 (when Bonutto and Alcorso were interned), and mount as the war goes against Britain (1994:187). This is when the cry "You're on the list!" becomes a current, half jocular, half sinister greeting (1994:192). The impecunious but high-school educated Peter Delano is interned on 10 March 1942, at the age of twenty-one and just three days after his registry office marriage to his sixteen-year-old bride. This is part of the mass internment of Queensland Italians that follows the loss of Singapore, the attack on Pearl Harbour, and the prospect of Japanese invasion, and Delano's experience is presented within the collective experience of the Italian internees, with scenes including that at the Ingham railway station (1994:194) and the arrival of the trainload of internees at Castle Hill in Townsville (1994:196), where Peter experiences a phantasmagoric hallucination which marks that life-changing event (1994:197-8). Then follows the real-life nightmare of Stuart Creek Prison:

> It was no longer a matter of identification of an Italian as an Alien; he was now indelibly tattooed – an Enemy-Alien. It was traumatic. It carried a stigma. The Naturalization Certificate that attested to his allegiance to the Crown and that influenced his pride in citizenship, now remained suspect – valueless in a moral and civil sense (Dalseno 1994:199-200). (That the tattooing here is metaphorical does not make it less hurtful.)

Both the collective scenes and the individual experiences of the internment process are unique to Dalseno's account, all the more so by their fullness of circumstantial detail and by the snatches of waggish backchat. There is the interminable train ride through four States, starting at Ingham and ending at Barmera, the station for Loveday in South Australia: this features the cramped conditions aboard a bare cattle-truck, the incident of Frank Spertino being manhandled by a police guard, the jeers and abuse by the Australian crowd at Bundaberg, the army staging post at Gaythorne near

[5] It is curious that Dalseno refers to Italian Australians as his "co-nationals", though his *alter ego*, Peter Delano, in *Sugar, Tears and Eyeties*, has his Australian British citizenship confirmed after the end of his internment.

Brisbane, where a floodlit night-time transfer from train to truck was effected (1994:201-5).

The narrator describes the astonishment of the internees at being greeted at Gaythorne with a Fascist salute by two Italians under whose instructions they are put (1994:209). The fact that the two are Sicilians provokes comment by the narrator about the differences and the divide between northerners and southerners from Italy that recurs consistently from time to time in the book, Peter Delano and those close to him being mainly northerners from the Veneto (1994:211). The narrator also records the dictum of a character identified only as “a cynic”: “Far better to have a death in the house than have a Britisher at the door” (1994:217), which is explained by the corpulent communist cook, Frederico (*sic*), in terms of the evils committed in the name of the British Empire (1994:220). At Seymour, in Victoria, the Italian internees are subjected to more jeers and insults by the Anglo-Australian crowd, but Peter’s humiliation is mitigated by the sympathy of an Australian woman whose son is a prisoner-of-war of the Italians in Africa (1994:219).

The reader is presented with what is probably the fullest existing description of the Loveday camp, its setting, and the living arrangements within it, beginning with a longish march from Barmera station to Loveday through vast vineyards (1994:222-3), then the humiliating stripping and body search, followed by the change of clothes into the burgundy-coloured internment uniform, registration and interrogation. Dalseno makes much of the questioning of Peter Delano’s national identity, his legal name being Pietro, and his being unable to identify his precise place of birth in Italy (1994:224-5). The description of Camp 14D (the only one containing mixed nationalities) (1994:229, 234) is followed by a glance at the night sky: “The beauty was there for every living creature to enjoy” (1994:231). Peter is appointed Camp Secretary (apparently for lack of competition, but presumably also by virtue of his moderate level of education) (1994:234), and the narrator thus defines his new existential situation:

> Intimacies of yesterday were but straws in the wind. True, there was a persuasion that yesterday existed, but the awesome present, stark and unrealistic, conditioned him to believe that the mind was no longer his own. It now belonged to the compound. Yes, he ate with them; he drank with them; he showered with them. He lived, he laughed and he cried with them. Only experience would show that the concentration of humanity squeezed morale to a point where he saw nothing but a screen projecting a depressing kaleidoscope (Dalseno 1994:235).

This is a markedly more negative outlook than that offered by Alcorso, though Delano/Dalseno, six years younger than Alcorso, and raised bilingually in the north Queensland sugar-growing area from which many hundreds of his fellow-internees had come, might have been expected to enjoy the bonhomie. But he may have been constrained by his position as camp secretary, as well as by his appalling family history.

Thus, Dalseno, like Alcorso, recalls a gallery of individuals and groups, but none of them providing the individual or collective uplift acknowledged by Alcorso. There is the rather dubious Army interpreter, the Maltese Sergeant Scibberas (*recte* Sciberras),

there are the two stand-offish and obviously wealthy unnamed Italian Jews (1994:246) (discussed above), there is the brilliant Hungarian violinist, Julian Helji, who, in conversations including two German internees, bewilders Peter with high-sounding pseudo-metaphysical claptrap (“Peter sat agog. The discussion was beyond his understanding”.) (1994:259, 264), the Nazi Paul von Hersfeldt, who regales Peter with contempt after the Italian armistice (1994:260), a chance meeting with a broken Joe Cantamessa (a doctor, and one of the most respected and loved of the Queensland Italians) at the dentist (1994:265), and the murder of Francesco Fantin (1994:267). This is relieved by an account of the hugely successful camp entertainment organized and performed by the internees (1994:255-7).

Following Mussolini’s overthrow and Italy’s withdrawal from the war in 1943, prospects improved for the release of internees. Dalseno presents the tribunal that presided over this process as “a farce” (1994:270), which he illustrates with some of the questions put to Delano, including the final one: “Do you feel resentment for your internment?” (1994:272) The narrator comments: “War was war and the exigencies of human conflict were observed by different eyes from different perspectives” (1994:271). The ex-internees take the train to Adelaide for their transition back to civilian life, famously marked by the distribution of Borsalino hats (1994:273). Delano is detailed to help the war effort in the Civil Alien Corps, which sees him making another train journey through the tropical night towards Maranboy in the Northern Territory to lay sleepers for the extension of the railway line (1994:273-4), but while there he has his naturalization confirmed, which meant that: “He alienated himself from his former (Italian) co-workers.” Thanks to his good schooling, he soon graduated from labouring on the track to helping the Australian office staff, among whom “He came to understand the meaning of tolerance. He was addressed as ‘mate’” (1994:276). A low-key melody of the quest for identity and acceptance thus dominates the finale of Dalseno/Delano’s life story.

Both Alcorso and Dalseno mark the internment experience as a rite of passage into the adult world where private history meets public history, but largely with opposite outcomes. Alcorso’s introspective, individualistic autobiography presents the enforced community of internment as enamouring contact with the Italian people, with a wider humanity, and with the Australian bush, even as an aesthetically inspiring experience despite the fear and hatreds in the camp. Alcorso’s deepest crisis comes with release from internment and re-immersion, in Sydney, in an individualistic existence whose foundations have radically shifted, and in which his Italian accent marks him as an enemy alien. Only now does identity become a problem for him, and the rest of his autobiography represents his search for an answer.

Dalseno, on the other hand, presents his Delano (born out of wedlock of a *déclassée* patrician Venetian mother and abandoned by his father) as belonging to the social group of the Herbert River Italians and yet detached from them more than ever in the debased community of internment. For him, internment offers few redeeming features apart from everyday sordid farce and the grand variety show. Peter’s deep crisis comes right at the start, with his nightmarish vision at Castle Hill in Townsville, while release brings with it the fulfilment of the Australian identity towards which he had strenuously striven and reunion with his young wife from whom he had been torn after just three days of marriage.

Part of the difference between the two internment experiences must be due to different family origins – solid and secure in the case of Alcorso, shattered in that of Delano – and to upbringing – privileged and wholly Italian in Alcorso's case, radically challenged and predominantly Australian in Delano's. And yet, Alcorso's written English is much the more limpid of the two, lacking the disconcerting idiosyncrasies of Delano's. Experiences and outcomes are unique to individuals, and it certainly cannot be said that those of these two young internees reflect those of Bonutto or Maffina, or of farmers with families, or of any other internee. What counts is the perspective, which they bring to bear on reality, on life as lived.

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