No Place for Self:

Rethinking Indigenous malaise in Neo-liberal Political Economy

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Abstract:

There are widespread crises in Aboriginal society, evidenced by dysfunctional communities trapped in a paralysing malaise. The reasons cannot be adequately explained by legacies of colonisation, government neglect, misguided policies, or prevailing attitudes within Australia’s mainstream society. Although past government policies of assimilation and ‘faux’ self-determination, as well as enduring community prejudices, have stymied Indigenous prospects and ensured the marginalisation of many Indigenous people consigned to chronic socio-economic disadvantage, these do not adequately account for what is occurring in contemporary Indigenous Australia. Numerous anthropologists and other social scientists have focused on the confounding effects of government policy, historical legacy, and the conditions of modernity, but there is no unanimous agreement as to what is causing the acuteness of the social malaise. There is validity in distinguishing the variations of opportunity and lifestyles associated with geographic locality but, broadly speaking, Indigenous communities Australia-wide have, over the past three decades, experienced an escalating deterioration in community and individual well-being that has similar expressions and, I will argue, similar origins. The complex and compounding effects of the contributing external drivers, combined with the interplay of coping responses and cultural determinates within Indigenous cultures, means that clearly identifying singular causal links is not an adequate way to advance understandings of what exactly is going on. What is, however, common to all Indigenous communities is the political economy of which they are part.

Though there is no shortage of discussion and community angst, little attention has been paid to the political economy of which Aboriginal people are a part, even by anthropologists directly examining the present social malaise. I take the position that distinctive characteristics of the neo-liberal order that currently characterises Australia’s political economy, which has influenced policy direction and governance, has contributed to a major dislocation in the ways Indigenous people reproduce meaningful social identities and practices.
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1 Introduction

Some of the conditions among the modern Aborigines impel me to also wonder if anthropology itself should not reconsider some of its favourite ideas. Have we truly understood the process by which the modern Aborigines are, to some extent at least, transforming themselves as well as being transformed by things beyond their control?

W. E. H. Stanner, 1958

A State of Perpetuity

Many Indigenous Australians continue to live in appalling conditions. This is despite the intensified government efforts that have taken place over the past three and a half decades to tackle entrenched socio-economic deprivation. The twenty first century has not begun, as was hoped, as an era of collective and individual progress and achievement. Indigenous disadvantage persists and, furthermore, conditions have worsened. The marginal position of Indigenous Australians as part of contemporary Australia is a seemingly intractable fact. The central tenet of this thesis is that neo-liberalism, a socio-political economy that is primarily concerned with the maximisation of profit, a lessening of state control and taxation, and in which social well-being is understood as a positive by-product of a healthy free-market model, is proving to be a major contributing factor to the malaise currently gripping many Indigenous communities.

In developing my position I take up the challenge put forward by Cowlishaw (2003:2) who asked whether Australian anthropology had anything ‘relevant to say about the alleged crisis in Aboriginal society today’ (my emphasis). My thesis addresses this question on two levels.
The first is concerned with the discourse around the existence or not of a ‘crisis’ in Aboriginal society. I proceed with the supposition that, although social and economic deprivations have been an ongoing feature, albeit in differing degrees, of the manner in which Indigenous peoples were colonised, and have included the destruction of their autonomous economies and their marginalisation in the economies which replaced them, severe social malaise as a feature of contemporary Indigenous experience is a more recent historical development. The notion of an ‘alleged crisis’ can serve to discount the dysfunction being witnessed today as little more than a consequence of the views of ‘onlookers’. Furthermore, it implies that what we see is not different, materially or socially, from conditions witnessed in the past. Whilst it is not difficult to call up ethnographic accounts that record deleterious conditions in Indigenous communities, the all encompassing acuteness of the socio-economic conditions is nevertheless one that historically has no precedent.

The second point on which my thesis addresses Cowlishaw’s concerns, considers what contributions if any, anthropology can make to analysing the present social malaise, and how it may be better understood. I argue that the past thirty years have seen an intensification of state intrusions into the daily lives of Indigenous Australians as they have become incorporated into the market economy of mainstream Australian society. This level of state intrusion has not been previously experienced, even in the authoritarian era of assimilation, and with the emergence of neoliberal socio-political ideology as the dominant order it has become a suffocating presence. An anthropological understanding of the socio-economic conditions found in many Indigenous communities offers a way of ‘measuring the significance of lives that appear to have no possibility of success in the eyes of those whose judgements dominate the world’ (Cowlishaw 2004:5). It also has the capacity to delegitimize the stereotyping of ‘the Aboriginal problem’ as due to an
Indigenous incapacity to exploit the fruits of contemporary Australia. The ‘pauperisation’ of Indigenous Australians of which Elkin (1951) spoke has been revisited, with some highlighting the impact of ‘separatist policies’ that pushed for ‘socialist remote communities experiments’ (Hughes 2005). In explaining the social climate in which many Indigenous peoples are thought to be culturally destitute, Hughes (2005) argues they no longer have any ties to real Aboriginal life-ways, and are unable to effectively participate in the dominant order and non-Aboriginal life-ways. Without any consideration of cultural and historical specificity, the social, moral, and economic state of Indigenous Australia is rendered as a deficit inherent to Indigenous culture.

In contrast, I argue that it is no longer sufficient to understand ‘the Aboriginal problem’ in terms of the legacies left behind by colonisation, assimilation, or ‘failed’ self-determination. Nor is it simply attributable to cultural deficit. Much of the discourse around the increasingly evident social malaise has neglected to position the ‘Aboriginal problem’ within the contemporary political economy. Until now, anthropological commentary addressing the positions Indigenous peoples occupy in Australian society has largely focused on resistance and race. Beyond anthropology, in the broader commentary arena, an Indigenous ‘culture of poverty’ has found a voice. I position my analysis, differently, significantly and appropriately, within an economic context.

**Political Economy and Anthropological Considerations**

Whilst contemporary Indigenous experience is part of an ongoing history of marginalisation, there are specific characteristics of Australia’s more recent embrace of neo-liberal economic policy reform (also known as economic rationalism after Pusey 1991) that bear significantly on current conditions. I will argue that implicit values underlying the new forms of governance, and the new approaches to resourcing
Indigenous people in situations of economic deprivation and decline, have produced specific dislocations in the ways Indigenous peoples reproduce meaningful social identities and practices. The persistence of social trauma is largely facilitated by the ‘soft knife of state policies’ that embed the experience of violation in the mundane everyday activities of life (Das and Kleinman 2001:10).

Positioning analysis within a political economy approach allows a more comprehensive understanding of what has been unfolding in Indigenous communities over the past few decades, and thus enables a reconceptualisation of what constitute ‘problems’ and how they might be understood. The ways neo-liberalism has impacted on Indigenous Australia requires a localised understanding of neo-liberalism which extends beyond the generalised definition of it as a set of prescriptive economic rules for free-market engagement. The understanding of neo-liberal socioeconomics used in this thesis draws on Austin-Broos’ (1996) formulation that the free-market (and hence neo-liberalism) is a type of moral order; an order of value embedded in a now diffuse ‘Western world’ marked by specific institutional features. Rather than understanding neo-liberalism as a form of abstracted economic practice, Austin-Broos (1996:178) sees the market and the logic within which it is sited as ‘a particular meaningful order with particular value orientations and not others’. The implication for Indigenous Australians is that they are confronting the imposition of an order which is not and in some cases cannot be meaningful for them. This creates significant social tension, with little promise of amelioration or capacity for cultural reproduction.

**Indications of Social Malaise**

As Marcia Langton (2009) has recently acknowledged, the past thirty years have ushered in significant improvements to some aspects of contemporary Indigenous experience: the
emergence of a “class of Aboriginal professionals [such as] doctors and lawyers and surgeons and dentists, engineers”, for example. Such career opportunities would not have been possible when Langton was a child, and stand as testament to work done by organisations such as the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAASTI, 1958 to 1973) and the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (est. 1991, now called Reconciliation Australia), other governing bodies such as the now disbanded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC 1989-2004), and individual activists such as Langton herself. However, there are also areas, as Langton (2009) observes, in which things for Indigenous people have deteriorated:

What’s worse? First of all, the standards of education are in some parts of the country so bad it’s difficult to imagine that this could happen in a First World nation, a developed nation. The levels of alcohol abuse, foetal alcohol syndrome, are worse than in some parts of the Third World, and as a result, certain health conditions are becoming extremely worrying. So we have heart disease, diabetes; the effects of alcohol are pretty bad; vehicle accidents as a result of alcohol; drug use is particularly bad in some parts of the country; drug induced psychosis and rates of attempted suicide and suicide are accelerating ... I believe that the incidence of child abuse and child neglect has increased dramatically as a result of alcohol and drug abuse and increasing poverty.

As a descriptor, social malaise, first voiced by Sullivan in 1986, captures the sense in which many Indigenous communities have become paralysed. Many now lack the stamina required to move forward culturally, socially, politically or economically. An atmosphere of inertia has become a feature of contemporary Indigenous experience. The optimism and energy levels of the late 1970s, that propelled much of the political activism for Indigenous causes, no longer appears to be part of community dynamics. The later part of
the twentieth century ushered in a public fatigue, even hostility towards issues concerning Indigenous Australians. By the late 1990s the Howard Coalition Government more forcefully expressed its views about the deleterious effects of self-management policies, identifying them as perpetuating the socio-economic lag within Aboriginal Australia. In 2004 the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), which had been set up under the Hawke Labour Government in 1989 to serve as the main representative body for Indigenous Australians at both State and Federal levels, was dismantled by the Coalition in favour of “mainstreaming” service delivery. The shift in government policy away from Indigenous specific services and agencies was regarded as the required remedy for “The Decade of Squalor”, that is, the 1990s, as one headline described it, in which:

one fact is demonstrably clear: the policies of the International Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, based on self-rule with little accountability, have done more damage to indigenous Australians than the white missions of the 1930s did (The Australian 17 June 2003:11, my emphasis).

The growing fatigue in public sentiment corresponded with the emergence of a political rhetoric that espoused ‘mutual obligation’, ‘practical reconciliation’, and in more recent years the emergency intervention in the Northern Territory, all of which implicitly place Indigenous social and economic conditions on the shoulders of Indigenous peoples themselves.

One way to regard the 2004 dismantling of ATSIC is as a bookend to the era of ‘progressive policy’ that sought to embrace Indigenous difference and devolve some degree of autonomy to Indigenous peoples. As a governing body that was rejected in favour of ‘mainstreaming’, ATSIC’s demise came to symbolise the redeployment of Indigenous difference as once again the culprit rather than a potential part of the solution.
to statistical inequalities in Indigenous socio-economic conditions. The previous thirty years of Indigenous policy reform produced precisely the opposite of the intended alleviation of poverty, and the fostering of socio-economically vibrant Indigenous communities. State interventions had produced communities that were, to use Gringrich’s (1997) expression, quite literally ‘exhausted’.

The absence of community dynamism is coupled with a second significant feature, namely the rise in aberrant behaviours that undermine the ‘strong commitment of Aboriginal people to each other’ (Macdonald 2006:2). Stealing from kin, child sexual abuse, ‘dirty fighting’ and violence resulting in serious injuries and homicides, as well as suicide are some of the markers of what can only be described as self-imploding behaviour. The Indigenous moral orders that have previously provided for social and cultural cohesion, and buffered Indigenous domains from the pressures of colonial and post-colonial hegemony appear now to be fracturing under the pressure of internal ruptures.

One of the more sobering analyses of contemporary Indigenous experience is Tatz’ (2001) study of Indigenous suicide. Regarding the increased occurrence of attempted suicide, and suicide as symptomatic of an overall attitude amongst, in particular, Indigenous youth, Tatz positions his analysis outside the mainstream’s primary focus on ‘mental illness’. He places it within the broader context of a social trend with roots in the historical legacy of racism, social exclusion and the incremental failures of successive governing policies concerned with Indigenous Australians, from assimilationist practices beginning in the early part of the twentieth century through to ‘practical reconciliation’ that emerged more recently. His study aimed to decipher what was different about Indigenous suicide, but it contributes to the larger discourse concerning the state of Indigenous communities, in that the alarming increase in suicide rates is interpreted as a manifestation of the acute distress
that Tatz identifies as a legacy of malevolent and paternalistically benevolent relations between Indigenous peoples and the state.

In trying to explain the source of contemporary suicide and other forms of violence which were not evident historically, Tatz (2001: 34-7; see also, Tatz 1999) posits decolonisation rather than continued modes of colonisation as the source. He argues that rather than a continuity of colonial oppression, it was the decolonizing process that set the foundations for the contemporary climate of violence and disorder. This has included, for instance, the removal of draconian structures and the rapidity with which Indigenous people were brought into the fold as ‘citizens’ with no previous experience and very little time to acquire the skills necessary for engagement with new governing institutions. The ‘new violence’, which includes attempted suicide and suicide, needs to be considered in the broader context of the social and economic changes taking place at the forefront of a neo-liberal society.

**Moral Orders in Contention**

Drawing from the Durkheimian notion of anomie, I regard the contemporary Indigenous social malaise as evidencing a disturbance of the collective order, whereby conditions of the social and/or moral norms have become severely compromised in some manner by significant changes in economic circumstance. Whether the disturbance is by ‘painful crisis or by beneficent but abrupt transitions’ (Durkheim 1963:252) is not the issue. Rather, there has not been adequate time to adapt to the new conditions or reorder them to conform to existing ideologies. Commonly held values and meanings become ambiguous, even disturbing. Through the discrepancies that begin to emerge between ideology and value, the pursuit of life goals “which [are] by definition unattainable” condemns one “to a state of perpetual unhappiness” (Durkheim 1963:248). Following up the causes of anomie,
Merton (1938) found it to be a social condition prominent in people who lacked an ability to coordinate their achievement of personal goals with the means available to them through social and institutional structures (as Macdonald 2000 argued in the context of Aboriginal demand-sharing). The regularity of unattainability experienced by people in such social conditions leads to a sense of confusion, anger, futility, and lack of purpose. The social disjuncture and sense of suffering occurs not because there is no longer a notion on which to base a moral order but, rather, because the moral order becomes undermined, or in Durkheim’s words, “in certain of its parts [it becomes] irremediably shattered” (Durkheim 1973:146). The contemporary Indigenous social malaise is an expression of the simultaneous pressures exerted by external social structures and institutions and the internal ruptures that these forces are producing.

Accepting to a certain degree that the cultural world of Indigenous Australians is muted when the issue of ‘social malaise’ is brought into focus, I take the position that levels of ‘normlessness’ are often in fact a reflection of Indigenous meanings and practices conflicting with the dominant order, thus being evidence of specific cultural orientations. I read the deleterious conditions as examples of Indigenous social systems, having already undergone significant change, struggling once again to orientate themselves in the contemporary dominant order. The incongruity between Indigenous ideologies and values and those of mainstream society, and the subsequent implications these discrepancies have for the everyday affairs of Indigenous Australians, has created a sense of futility within the Indigenous moral order as it wrestles with the often contradictory options that neo-liberalism presents.

The social and moral order of Indigenous society is being undermined in a manner and with a degree of ferocity that has not previously been matched in Indigenous-state
relations. I argue that the current malaise within communities stems in large part from the
social and moral order remaining specifically Aboriginal in character, as opposed to it
having become culturally impoverished. It is the failure by non-Indigenous people to
recognise the fact of difference; with the wrong assumption that ‘they’re mostly like us’;
and an inability or unwillingness to accommodate differences of Indigenous social and
moral order that are creating heightened degrees of impasse between Indigenous and non-
Indigenous social worlds. However, in saying this, I do not wish to understate the conflicts
and tensions present in Indigenous communities: the state of affairs is dismal;
communities are breaking down, dysfunction is rife. But such apparent failures need to be
differentiated, on one hand as failures to sustain a manageable way to articulate two
cultures, on the other as attributable to the corrosive effects of the insistence by the
dominant society that people conform to the social and moral order of a liberal democratic
ideology that champions neo-liberal forms of socio-economic development. The
colonising history of Australia attests to the longevity of Aboriginal people’s
encapsulation within hegemonic state powers that sought to reform Indigenous social and
moral orders. This has happened only partially. My argument is that the state’s neo-liberal
approach is escalating the disjunctures and tensions.

Thesis Outline

Proceeding from the assertion that there is a high degree of social malaise to be found
throughout Indigenous Australia (see Austin-Broos 2009, Cowlishaw 2004, Macdonald
2008, Sutton 2001), I begin by exploring some of the contributing factors to current
conditions. Why has Indigenous peoples’ capacity to buffer state intrusion diminished in
recent years, notwithstanding that this has been during a period of ‘progressive policy’
aimed to counteract earlier failures to develop humane and meaningful approaches and
confer a greater degree of autonomy to Indigenous peoples lives? This is not simply an argument that a segment of the Australian community are failing to cope with modernity.

Chapter Two provides an overview of the anthropological literature concerned with Indigenous social malaise. I critically analyse recent ethnographies and reposition these through an analysis of social malaise, understanding this as characteristic of state interventions at a local level in the context of a neo-liberal economic order. What becomes clear is that much of the argument developed thus far, for example in discourses of resistance and racism, are unable to address the historic specificity of the current malaise. Nor can commentaries such as Noel Pearson’s (2000) ‘passive welfare’ or Sutton’s (2001) ‘traditional cultural continuity’ adequately capture the complexity of contemporary Indigenous experience because they diminish the structural violence visited on Indigenous Australians by the state. Chapter two concludes by considering how Indigenous notions of being in the world directly influence how they engage with the wider Australian domain. Indigenous notions of person not only bear on the ways Indigenous people partake in Australian society, they also act as a filter to the stuffs of life- the things, the people, the relationships- that will ultimately be deemed valued, or not, to an Indigenous ‘figured world’ (cf. Clammer, Poirier and Schwimmer 2004).

In Chapter Three I broaden the analysis of Indigenous social malaise to include consideration of the neo-liberal political economy. The scale of the cultural confrontations the neo-liberal order presents to Indigenous well-being will be illuminated through a focus on personhood and the ways in which practices of the state inform not only the social, but also economic pursuits of individuals. I argue that, as the dominant order now encompassing Indigenous Australians, neo-liberalism works to deconstruct the foundational morality and value orientations of Indigenous notions of personhood. An
appreciation for the deconstructive quality neo-liberalism has for Indigenous notions of personhood is central to understanding why misconceptions arise within the broader Australian community, whose notions of personhood are conceptualised in term of career, and for whom success is measured through the acquisition of certain forms of power, wealth and status commodities.

Juxtaposing notions of the moral and valued person in neo-liberal discourse with those of Indigenous notions of personhood highlights the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings, and goes some way towards explaining why expectations on both sides are so often disappointed. The individualisation of responsibility so paramount to neo-liberal ideology is deployed in such a way as to interpret deplorable community conditions as the ‘fault’ of an Indigenous incapacity to cope with modernity, leading to Indigenous difference being rendered as ‘deficit’ (Austin-Broos 2005). Difference therefore cannot be regarded as anything other than pathology (see Cowlishaw 2004, Macdonald 2008, Merlan 1998, Povinelli 1998; 2002). I draw significantly from Austin-Broos’ body of work on the politics of moral order (1997 to 2009) to bring into focus the often incompatible trajectories of life goals, underscored by the competing orders of Indigenous kin-based economies and non-Indigenous market economies, which in their current historical form are neo-liberal.

By placing my analysis in the context of political economy the reading of social malaise in Indigenous Australia can also be developed beyond the reductive ‘culture of poverty’, and is able to raise questions about Indigenous Australians’ place within modernity. The discussion turns towards the intersection of Indigenous moral orders with the dominant neo-liberal moral order, which has required a great degree of compromise on the part of Indigenous peoples to effectively participate in a manner that is considered both
appropriate, and valued by the broader community of contemporary Australia. It becomes clear that what is not taken into account in attempts to reshape Aboriginal communities is an anthropological understanding of difference, and whether and how this might be legitimated and provided for. If this is not to become integral to state policy, the malaise will undoubtedly increase for some time to come as Aboriginal people confront a deconstruction of their selves in circumstances not under their control.

The concluding chapter considers the role that state policy has had in producing the conditions now being experienced in many communities. In both an administrative and political role the Australian state has always been required to ‘do something’ about the Aboriginal population, whether it be establishing relations of reciprocity, rounding people up on missions and reserves, or deferring policies of self-determination. As Beckett (1988:4) has noted:

Almost all aspects of the ‘Aboriginal problem’ are the concern of the national government. For its part, the state is so inextricably bound up with the Aborigines [and] cannot easily disengage; rather, each effort to solve the problem binds the two closer together. The implication of this is that the state is an integral part of the problem it is supposed to be solving.

The final chapter is a brief discussion of the importance of political economy in anthropological considerations. The current neo-liberal political ideology espoused by the Australian state develops a repertoire of qualities that are proving to be particularly problematic to the production and reproduction of a meaningful, culturally specific sense of well-being throughout Indigenous Australia. The stresses of neo-liberalism are not specific to Indigenous peoples - they are impacting on minorities more generally - but they are compounded by the structural violence they inherently intensify among people who are both economically marginalised and culturally ‘other’.
2 Cataloguing Indigenous Experience.

The multifaceted nature of the ‘the Aboriginal problem’ has produced a wide range of entry points for analysis. Anthropologists and other social scientists have focused on the compounding effects of government policy, historical legacy, and the conditions of modernity, though there is no unanimous agreement as to what is causing the acuteness of the social malaise. The inadequate response of government policy, whether it has been regarded as simply neglectful or misguided, is implicated as a major contributing factor. The contribution of the colonial, assimilation, and self-management eras have each been seen as integral to understanding the current condition of Indigenous communities. There has been no shortage of studies examining the changing conditions in Indigenous societies as they have interacted with the nation-state and continue to be entrenched on the margins of mainstream Australia (see, for example, Austin-Broos 2009; Beckett 1988; Collmann 1988; Merlan 1998; McKnight 2002; Morris 1989; Povinelli 1993). Themes of racism and the barriers that the racialisation of Indigeneity create have also had currency (see Cowlishaw 1988, 1999, 2004; Cowlishaw, G. and B. Morris 1997).

The following is by no means a complete overview of the many contributions to this discourse, but it does represent the main issues and dominant themes that recur. Concern over Indigenous well-being and the persistence of socio-economic disadvantage has never been far from the gaze of Australian anthropology.
Disjunctures in Policy Implementation

Critiquing the implementation and limited success of Indigenous policy since the 1970s is not, as Rowse (1988) would have one believe, yielding to ‘an easy pessimism and to dismiss the substantial efforts Aboriginal people have made in constructing organisations which serve the developing cultural goals of their communities’ (1988:50). Levels of pessimism and constant criticism about the state of Aboriginal Australia is far from easy for Aboriginal people themselves. Being repeatedly confronted with the fact that they live in communities that bear all the hallmarks of dysfunction must be a painful reminder of the seemingly intractable position of marginality afforded to them as Australian citizens. Criticism of policy need not be criticism of the substantial efforts made by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, but rather recognition that the cultural goals often pursued by communities have always been limited by the nation-state’s unwillingness and/or incapacity to accommodate difference. Though intended to ameliorate many of the problems that have come to be historically associated with Indigenous Australians’ lot in life, ‘progressive policy’ in some respects seems to have further exacerbated them.

In 1982, while discussing the prospects of self-management in the Alligator River region, von Sturmer reflected upon the social environment that was the target of the policy. The realities he described in 1982 could be applied to many Indigenous communities in 2009. All the text-book indicators of social malaise were present: violence, substance abuse, poor educational opportunities, alcohol abuse, limited employment and general sense of futility. In presenting his dismal appraisal of Alligator River communities von Sturmer was simply outlining the difficulties that were the ‘realities’ of many Indigenous peoples lives, emphasising that unless these issues were addressed, the self-management policy would not only lack the capacity to overturn the state of malaise, but would also likely
further the dismal trajectory that many Indigenous communities were already on. Problems in these communities were not one dimensional and could not simply be attributed to ‘oppression, ‘white brutality’, ‘black powerlessness’, helplessness’ (von Sturmer 1982:73). Rather they were a culmination of complex processes of colonial history, intercultural and intracultural interactions ‘dominated by mutual disregard and exploitation’ (1982:72). More recently, as illustrated below through the comments of Tony Abbott (p.23) and John Howard (p.24), the culpability of Government in fostering Indigenous social malaise has been played down with a focus instead on the failures of progressive policy. A “Don’t shoot me, I’m only the messenger” type of response has seen governments side-step culpability in the repeated failures to secure Indigenous equity, with the blame resting in the idealized, and evidently impractical and unrealistic, notions behind self-determination.

Importantly, von Sturmer identified as part of the complex not only the commonly understood descriptors of social disadvantage, but also the more unpalatable ‘behaviour of excess’ by various Indigenous individuals in the community. His considerations of such features goes some way towards capturing the complexities involved in analysing what contributes to any community’s social conditioning. On the one hand there are the markers that disclose a history of oppression and, on the other, there are the excessive behaviours of some individuals that seem to exacerbate social strife. The inclusion of the ‘excessive’ behaviours was, for many people involved in Indigenous Affairs, an uneasy admission. The recognition by von Sturmer that there were also drivers within the communities themselves that fed into the situation he was describing goes some way towards understanding the difficulties in untangling the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state. Rose (1986) also saw the need to understand the emergence of social distress as more than simply a result of passive Indigenous victimhood and the unequal power
relations with non-Aboriginals. The eleven vignettes provided by Rose (1986:24-25) of Indigenous experience spoke of alcohol abuse by the young, the escalations in alcohol fuelled violence leading to a sense of fear in communities, and in some cases abandonment of outstations where it was impossible to control the consumption of alcohol. She also recounts issues arising around political factionalism which in turn brought a halt to many individuals engagement with self-management and the political processes that had initially promised more control over locally available goods and services. Her application of the ‘double bind’ theory which focuses specifically on systematized relationships in a field of differential access to power’ (Rose 1986), shows how the policies of self-management and self-determination frequently required people to ‘act in a no-win situation [whilst denying] the opportunity to escape or to represent [the] situation to others’ (Rose 1986). Indigenous participation in local organisations set up for self-management were often unsuccessful because the requests placed by the locals were subject to ‘selective hearing [on behalf of the state and] only those decisions agreeable to outside power structures’ were accepted as legitimate’ (Rose 1986:27). Sullivan (1986) points to this systematized state denial as generating ‘cultural trauma by administrative processes’. Pressure to conform to state modes of self-management ensured that Indigenous peoples were implicated in the reproduction of social distress in their own communities.

Von Sturmer questioned the viability of self-management policy in a social setting that now saw Indigenous/ non-Indigenous relations ‘dominated by mutual disregard and exploitation’, and where the ‘climate of complete indifference’ on the part of some community leaders would likely give way to the ‘pursuit of self-interest’ (1982:72-3). In the present climate of neo-liberalism von Sturmer’s observations have a prophetic character. This social disquiet already present in the Alligator River region would prove to be but one element of liability for the implementation of self-management as a band-aid
policy. In anticipation of the capacity self-management policies held for rectifying all the social ills of Indigenous Australia, attention had not been paid by government officials to the tensions and stresses at the ground level that were already taking root. This oversight was in part due to the previous colonial history of the area being dominated by missionaries, who, though aided by government, nevertheless lay outside of its departments and agencies. Though authoritarian and paternal, the interface between Indigenous and non-Indigenous interaction had been of a more intimate nature, with key relationships usually having developed over long periods of time. Because of the longevity in interrelations, it could be said that knowledge of the local socio-cultural dynamics was ‘founded in experience and hard practice’, allowing ‘collective wisdom to pool’ (von Sturmer 1982:70-72). This would not be the case under the implementation of self-management policies that saw ‘interventions of a multiplicity of government departments and agencies…huge teams of non-Aboriginal functionaries keeping essential services…in operation, Europeans who factionalised across wide ideological gulfs (von Sturmer 1982:71-2), and so on and so forth.

In a speech addressed to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in 2006, Tony Abbott, then Health Minister of the Coalition Government, called for a return to ‘a form of paternalism ... based on competence rather than race’(Abbott 2006:5) to overcome the failings of health service delivery under self-management government policy. The appalling state of Indigenous health was regarded as evidence that ‘self-determination’ hadn’t worked. The ‘policy lessons’ drawn by the Minister were not concerned with the role successive governments had played in the ways it had conceived and implemented ‘self-determination’, rather they were lessons about the failure of the ‘idyllic communes’ of Coombsian politics (2006:2) that had naively aspired to manage themselves and negotiate their way into ‘modernity - with its benefits as well as its excesses’ (2006:4).
The persistence of appalling social conditions in Indigenous communities was thought by Abbott to be more the result of Indigenous inability than anything the government had done or not done: levels of spending in Indigenous affairs was evidence of the Government’s ‘good faith’ (2006:2).

However, declarations about the unmitigated failures of ‘self-determination’ ought to be called into question, especially when the role of government responsibility is actively diminished by touting ‘Indigenous incapacity’ as the scapegoat. If the most basic tenets of ‘self-determination’ are understood in terms of Indigenous Australians making decisions about government policies and projects that directly affect their lives, and having the subsequent choices they make respected and supported, the question of whether or not the policy of self-determination has been successful is distorting. As Dodson (2006) argues, the failure of self-determination is a myth because:

An approach that has never been tested cannot be deemed a failure. What we’ve had, at best, in Australia is a kind of self-administration, Aboriginal communities have been responsible for delivering the basic services. (Dodson. June 22, 2006. ‘Still blaming the victim’. The Age)

Macdonald’s (2001) critique of contemporary Australian Indigenous policy also argued that ‘self-determination’ has never really taken root in Australia. Amendments made by the Fraser government in 1975 saw ‘self-determination’ formally altered to ‘self-management’, although the terms were often used interchangeably by government. For the Coalition Government ‘self-management’ was understood as legislation that prescribed determined outcomes, rather than a concept with which to productively and most importantly, flexibly, encourage and assist Indigenous people to achieve their own desired outcomes. The possibilities of what might have been developed under self-determination were not only potentially out of reach of state influence they were unknown, and therefore
potentially threatening. Though both policies were treated as if they had a similar ring to them, they espoused markedly different policy orientations and endorsed very different notions of economic and political autonomy for Indigenous Australians and their communities. Any real potential embodied in self-determination policy was stifled by the practices of self-management policies that worked to bring Indigenous aspirations more in line with non-Indigenous life goals. Though self management was generally thought to be a progressive policy approach, the reality of what it actually offered Indigenous people in terms of political and social autonomy were closer to policies of the assimilation era (cf. Macdonald 2001).

Critics of any form of self-determination or self-management have legitimised their position by reference to the apparent divisiveness of this policy approach. In a speech characteristic of a confessional, former Prime Minister John Howard (2007) revealed that he had:

Never felt comfortable with the dominant paradigm for Indigenous policy, one based on ... a rights agenda that led ultimately ... towards welfare dependency and based on a philosophy of separateness rather than shared destiny.

Reducing self-determination to a rights agenda that was ultimately about separateness fails to account for the many ways in which Indigenous peoples have tried to incorporate and engage themselves with the Australian state. Macdonald (2004) has described the efforts made by Wiradjuri people toward self-determination. Far from being focused on establishing separateness, Wiradjuri pursued an agenda that sought to engage the Wiradjuri Regional Aboriginal Land Council in developing economic enterprises that could simultaneously incorporate them into the state, as well as provide social, political, and economic autonomy that was meaningful to them.
Failure to distinguish between Indigenous aspirations for autonomy and a philosophy of separateness has two implications. It showed a fundamental misunderstanding of what the core tenets of ‘self-determination’ were actually about. The desire to determine their own social, economic, political and cultural development was more about having substantive decision-making power in policy initiatives and processes, as opposed to just running the programs others had developed for them. It also enabled critics to present the policy as one that primarily sought separation of people - politically, economically, and socially. Once again, the criticism is not directed at policy implementation, or even acknowledges the problems arising from the various ways in which it might be interpreted. Rather the ideology behind ‘self-determination’ is touted as idealistic and misguided.

In the aftermath of the 2007 release of Little Children Are Sacred Report, the permit system in place in the Northern Territory was targeted as part of the government’s response. Rather than seeing the permit system as ‘a fundamental aspect of the Land Rights Act, and the most appropriate and effective tool’ (Ross 2007:239) for community protection, the system was implicated in the perpetuation and abetting of child sexual abuse because of the spatial seclusion it provided communities. The Coalition Government regarded the separateness facilitated by the Land Rights Act, and more broadly speaking self-determining policies, as responsible for the growth of outback ghettos in that they viewed the system as impeding economic development and limited adequate media access (and thus scrutiny of community conditions): the isolation from mainstream society became a donkey on which to pin the tail of blame (Ross 2007:241-2).

Kingsley Palmer (1990) continued the critique of self-management policies, showing they fell short of the intended amelioration of disadvantage. Palmer’s argument was not with ‘progressive policy’, rather he pointed to the way it was defined and implemented by the state. The state was merely exacerbating the colonial legacy of Indigenous dependency;
the very effect the program was aimed at remedying. Palmer (1990) clearly outlined challenges faced by both government bureaucrats and southern Pitjantjatjara alike, when Indigenous desires fell outside the range of bureaucratic conventions. Many of the developmental projects of Yalata were determined by priorities and ideals external to the community. The focus on producing a settlement that was more in line with twentieth century living, including water, sewage, power facilities and housing, primarily accommodated the desires of non-Indigenous notions of development. Self-management projects for improving the town developed ‘according to priorities that were those of the European Australians, not of the Aborigines, and Aborigines had little power to control development’ (Palmer 1990:172). The control of resources was in the hands of authorities who had by and large already assigned the funds to particular projects. The seeming disinterest on the part of the local Aboriginal population in projects to improve the township was in part a reaction to the government’s sole focus on a development that ignored the priorities of the Aboriginal residents.

The southern Pitjantjatjara had been forced from their homelands to the north by the 1950s nuclear testing in their country. Removal to Yalata saw them ‘compelled to live on country which was not their own and [to] which they had no affinity’ (1990:172). Disinterest in country and a sense of alienation from a mixed community blunted interest in self-management projects at Yalata. Palmer positions the Pitjantjatjara establishment of outstations as action to circumvent the difficulties and frustrations encountered when dealing with government bodies who were implementing the policy of ‘self-management’ in Yalata.

Palmer does not discuss the declining state of Indigenous well-being, but rather provides an account of the opposition that commonly occurred when initiatives of self-management didn’t fit the Aboriginal expectations, nor those of government. ‘Self-management’ was a
policy ostensibly aimed at empowering Indigenous Australians to make decisions about themselves and their communities. However, without control over resource allocation, success of the policy was always going to be dubious. The inclusion of Indigenous aspirations and influence in the decision-making processes that took place in Yalata were tokenistic, in that ‘at no stage were they presented with real choice. The money was not available for them to spend as they wished; rather, it was there for them to ‘manage’ according to the priorities and policies of the authorities that controlled the resources’ (Palmer 1990:172).

Government resistance to aid the return to homelands also stemmed from such projects not aligning with state expectations. Discrepancies between Indigenous desires and state sanctioned projects have been common in the ‘progressive policy’ era of the last thirty years. They outline the limitations in the state’s willingness to not only accept, but also accommodate difference. State limitations on the possibilities of ‘self-determination’ have ultimately contributed to the history of disappointment and arrested development that Indigenous communities might have experienced.

**Resistance and Agency**

The ways in which Indigenous Australians have reproduced meaningful social worlds throughout their often turbulent and traumatic experience of colonisation have, since the 1980s in particular, produced anthropological studies that have emphasised the successful renegotiating and incorporation of the hegemonic non-Indigenous order. Though Indigenous people continue to be situated on the periphery of mainstream Australia, ethnographies have been testament to the persistence of cultural specificity, despite the oppressive socio-political conditions of their lives. The continuity of Indigenous identity and world view has frequently been understood in terms of a paradigm of ‘resistance’.
Though Indigenous people’s position in Australia, both historically and currently, is economically and socio-politically subordinate, the ‘resistance’ approach argues that their position had never gone uncontested. The forms of resistance to dominant colonial and post-colonial social and cultural orders have produced a variety of responses.

Barry Morris’ *Domesticating Resistance* (1989) is a study of the changing configuration of power between the state and Dhan-gadi people of northern NSW when Aboriginal policy was redirected toward the project of assimilation. Morris was concerned with the ‘indirect and discrete forms of resistance which are inscribed at the level of culture’ and which ‘impose limitations on a system of power in which those in authority appear to exercise unlimited control’ (1989:34). The assimilation policy introduced in 1937 was not only ‘subject to subversion by continuous attempts by the Dhan-gadi to resist incorporation into the encompassing state system’, but was also implicated in the forms of response it produced amongst the Dhan-gadi (1989:33).

One such example of the way in which the Dhan-gadi impeded the state’s ability to control them was by limiting the information about themselves and their social relationships that could be held by authorities. As Morris (1989:49) points out ‘this was especially significant given the Welfare Board’s emphasis on detailed administration through the gathering of biographical information’. The Dhan-gadi also gathered ‘reconnaissance’ information about the managers on the station, as well as non-Aboriginals they were likely to interact with in the wider society. This type of knowledge was ‘a necessity if they were to limit their own vulnerability to European control. Aborigines consistently possessed more information about and understanding of the European community than the reverse’ (1989:49). Morris’ outline of the historically specific responses brought about by the assimilation policy, which saw elaboration and intensification of institutional control,
sought to dispel the notion that historically state-enforced inequalities have been all-encompassing, or have achieved the ends intended by the state.

David Trigger (1992) similarly identified resistance to the dominant order in the Aboriginal town of Doomadgee in Northern Queensland by the demarcation of ‘Blackfella’ and ‘Whitefella’ domains. The dual domains were spheres in which the ‘material, intellectual and social activity indexed a high degree of social distance between Aboriginals and Whites’, Trigger argued that the maintenance of separate domains through ‘exclusionary practices on the part of subordinate Aboriginal people’ was regarded as a form of resistance successful in limiting the intrusions inherent in colonialism (1992:79). Such readings of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations appealed because they provided an alternative framework, one that acknowledged a degree of autonomy, albeit limited, from the dominant order, and of agency by the subalterns. However, Trigger’s portrayal of Aboriginal social closure has been subject to criticism concerning its unproblematic use of dual and distinct Whitefella versus Blackfella domains.

Robinson (1997) questioned the degree to which such domains have been able to maintain impenetrable barriers under the intrusive influence of dominant authorities. As Merlan (1998) made clear in her ethnography of change and continuity in the lives and socio-spatial orientations of Indigenous peoples around the town of Katherine in the Northern Territory, presupposing ‘the autonomy or independence of the social field as solely indigenous’ neglects an entire field of social interactions ‘between Aborigines and others over time and at different levels’ (1998:vii) of the private, public, and bureaucratic spheres that are central to the lived experience of Indigenous peoples lives. Merlan (1998:232-3) argued that the compartmentalisation of domains posits the:
Changing modern ... against the unchanging traditional, the artificial or constructed against the natural ... and nonindigeneity (with its histories of immigration, mixing heterogeneity, melting pots, multiculturalism) against indigeneity (with its firstness and enormous demand placed upon it for phenotypicality, full-bloodedness, cultural essentialisms).

It is the presentation of blackfella/whitefella domains as somehow bounded that has served to reproduce the ‘savage slot’ (Trouillot 1991) that Indigenous Australians have occupied for much of Australia’s history. It attributes a level of autonomy to the Blackfella domain that, even if in past decades was sometimes partially possible, is no longer. Recognising the permeability of socio-cultural domains problematises binaries such as ‘resistance or accommodation’ and ‘continuity or change’ and places Indigenous experience in a de-historical present. Merlan (1998:233) argued that neither the persistence of, nor the change to, Indigenous socio-cultural practice was fundamentally more important than the other in producing specifiable Indigenous perspectives. Such dynamics must be understood as being ever-present and variable in the everyday lives of Indigenous Australians.

More recently, Cowlishaw (2004:200) put forth the ‘logic of dissent’ as a way in which to examine behaviour by Indigenous people that might have been viewed as resistance, but that is now most commonly understood by non-Indigenous observers as indicative of overall social disorder within Indigenous Australia. In her examination of race relations in the rural town of Bourke, NSW, Cowlishaw (2004:92-97) cast her eye over the contested public space of the streetscape that frequently hosted Indigenous ‘performances of stigma’:

When some Aboriginal girls in the main street begin shouting violent abuse at one another, a white woman serving in the shop opposite says to me with a combination of embarrassment and contempt, “They’re at it again”. Another day a black woman outside the pub yells abusively, swearing and
cursing another who is walking away from her down the street. At full volume she screams “I’ll kick your cunt till it bleeds”, loud, intense, her jealous anger apparently out of control. These black women are aware of being seen and are acting out the grotesquerie attributed to them by their white fellow citizens (Cowlishaw 2004:93).

The aggression and violence of the language and physical altercations that sometimes occur in the streets of Bourke amongst Indigenous individuals is explained by Cowlishaw as an attempt to challenge and invert the “redneck” stereotyping of debauched Aboriginality. The ‘performances’ are intended to produce counter-narratives to the stigmatised Aboriginality that dominates the race relations in Bourke. Though non-Indigenous observers understand such displays as epitomising the socially degenerate conditions often thought to be inherent in Indigenous culture, knowledgeable Indigenous viewers see such acts as ‘a particular and understandable response to circumstances’(2004:94) that encompass them. Cowlishaw argues that the lack of respect, empathy, and sensitivity that characterises many Indigenous experiences of inter-race relations produces excessive Indigenous behaviour as a form of protest against the harshness with which they have, both historically and currently, been judged by the non-Indigenous population. The lack of recognition of legitimate Indigenous alterity by wider society has led to exaggerated parodying of ‘the recalcitrant Aboriginal’ as a resistance tactic. As Cowlishaw understands it, ‘those expressing violent sentiments in the main street are particular performers whose marginal and repellent status is made more offensive and thus more powerful through excess and abandon’ (2004:94). In defiance of non-Indigenous norms of civilised public behaviour the violence, excessive drinking, swearing, and raucous nature of Indigenous social interaction is read by Cowlishaw as an assertion of Indigenous identity.
However, as Robinson (1997:123) has argued, such a rendering of Indigenous identity ‘derived from resistance alone [is] an empty [and] inauthentic one which [does] not do justice to internal contexts of meaning, action, and individuation’. Self effacing and destructive acts can be inscribed with socially significant meanings specific to Indigenous life experiences. Indeed, ethnographically ‘the verbal fracas’ has been featured in the “Aboriginal domain” as indicative of a robust and healthy intra-political life (see for example Samson 1980; Macdonald 1994). That does not mean that they cannot also be, and often are, indicative of social distress of some kind, but that the distress is not necessarily attributable to ‘race’ relations.

Not all expressions of what Cowlishaw (1988) calls ‘oppositional culture’ can be understood as consciously political; to do so would be to underestimate the degree to which such aberrant behaviours reflect the phenomenon of social suffering and sense of distress. Whilst subversive strategies (Morris 1989), the perception of Blackfella/Whitefella domains (Trigger 1992), and the ‘logic of dissent’(Cowlishaw 2004) and resistance discourses provide ‘other ways of measuring the significance of lives that appear to have no possibility of success in the eyes of those whose judgments dominate the world’ (Cowlishaw 2004:5), these approaches nevertheless tend to avoid recognition of the profoundly difficult circumstances of Indigenous peoples lives because the focus they place on ‘agency’ usurps considerations of the real limitations present in the daily lives of Indigenous Australians. By implication, to ‘resist’ is to have the capacity to assert some sense of autonomy, however it does not necessarily follow that Indigenous people have a great deal of room to produce socio-cultural worlds that are self sustaining nor heavily encroached by the dominant order. The burdens and constraints placed on Indigenous ways of being are perhaps now more than ever reaping disastrous consequences on Indigenous Australians. The destructive nature of many modes of
‘resistance’ chosen by Indigenous Australians highlights the limited opportunity for recourse provided through state sanctioned institutions to address issues of Indigenous equality.

Models of resistance produce accounts that describe active engagements with modernity. Cowlishaw has relied largely on models of resistance to interpret the social conditions in the places she has worked. Interpretations of Indigenous responses to the issues colonisation has confronted them with in recent decades within this paradigm of ‘resistance’ has had general currency but these overstate the capacity of Indigenous peoples in contemporary Australia to minimise the increasing interventions of the state in one form or another. Approaches such as Cowlishaw’s (2004) ‘logic of dissent’ fail to account for why it is that particular ruptures are occurring at this particular time.

**The Problems of Re(thinking) ‘Culture’**

In public discourse expressions of outrage over conditions in many Aboriginal communities stem from the self-evident images we frequently see on our television screens. Rubbish strewn communities, herds of mangy dogs, over-crowded housing, childless class rooms - such images provoke reactions of disbelief. How could this be occurring in the back yard of Australia? Rarely is the concern accompanied by an understanding of historical and social backgrounds that produce such dismal conditions. The human face put on these crumbling communities is frequently a stereotype of an aberrant contemporary Aboriginality, the ‘iconoclastic image of Aboriginal men and women as “drunks”’ (Langton 1997:83) and, more recently, petrol sniffing youths. The escalation of violence in Indigenous communities, it has to be said, goes hand in hand with the increase in substance abuse.
Recently however there have been references made to particular modes of behavior as having deeply rooted antecedents in the past, and therefore having a cultural basis by which to explain it. Sutton (2001) points to archaeological evidence in an effort to comprehend violent behaviour commonly observed in Indigenous communities today. In an attempt to ‘rethink culture’, Sutton draws on archaeological records of Indigenous Australians to show that acts of violence took place in pre-colonial society. However, to assume that there is necessarily any correlation between the high levels of violence occurring in Indigenous communities today and practices that took place prior to colonial settlement, or indeed that such acts even carry with them an overarching degree of continuity of meaning and context is problematic. For Sutton, ‘the modern myth’ (2001:152) of denying the continuity of violence in contemporary Indigenous communities with their ‘traditional’ past is part of the wider discourse propagated by left-wing idealists and a few Indigenous activists (2001:128). He sees the issues now plaguing Indigenous Australians as arising from the intersection between ‘recent ... historical factors of external impact, with a substantial number of ancient, pre-existent social and cultural factors’ (2001:127). The question of what role ‘traditional culture’ may play in the contemporary state of malaise has, in Sutton’s view, mostly been avoided out of fear that it might exacerbate a strain of public discourse already hostile to Indigenous affairs.

The association of historical and contemporary conditions with the continuity of pre-colonial ‘traditional’ cultural practices has merit in that it highlights some of the dilemmas that may arise in the articulation of socio-cultural practices, and is certainly an important factor to consider. But recognition of the limits to such interpretations must be kept in mind. Socio-cultural practices may be reproduced over time, but the meanings with which they are imbued are not immutable.
Macdonald’s (1994) account of fighting amongst the Wiradjuri is a good counter example, and a convincing argument as to why the complex of social, political, and economic factors need to be understood within their historical contexts. Fighting amongst Wiradjuri occurred, in the past and in the 1980s, in both cases according to rules of engagement, albeit changing ones. However, by the mid-1980s individuals regularly took part in what had come to be referred to as ‘dirty-fighting’ (1994:182) which reflected an undermining of local Aboriginal leadership. Thus we can see that a practice with roots in pre-contact society and present in many historical observations as well as oral histories, has now deviated away from the forms it had taken in pre-contact societies and recent history. What could once be reasonably regarded as evidence of a robust and functional society - a practice that once promoted social equilibrium and was socially sanctioned (1994: 191-194) – has now become indicative of dysfunction and social demise.

Pearson (2000) provides another example of a continuity of practice between pre and post-colonial worlds that has assumed different meanings because of the historical context in which they occur. Detailing the behavior involved in ‘drinking circles’ in his hometown of Hopevale, Pearson refers to the ‘real obligations and relationships under Aboriginal Law and customs’ that individuals engaged in drinking circles have exploited and transformed into a ‘cultural obligation to share grog’ (2000:17). Such applications of the ‘obligation and responsibility’ that is so central in the milieu of kin relations monopolises a disproportionate amount of family resources. There is enormous stress on the non-drinkers of communities to provide not only money for alcohol, but also caring for those people who are subsequently neglected by the individuals partaking in drinking, such as children and the elderly. While I see merit in Pearson’s analysis, he does not ask the more significant question as to why these people drink to such excess in the first place. That
they ‘share’ when they do so is not an explanation necessarily reflecting accurately continuity of practice.

Sutton (2001:152) also outlines what he sees as a correlation between those Indigenous communities that have largely remained outside the grasp of mainstream Australian society, but where alcohol is available, as being the communities where the worst cases of violence occur. This reading implies that Indigenous peoples who have remained ‘closer’ to their traditional practices, with shorter contact histories, seem to be coping less with the advent of modernity. As Macdonald (1994) highlights in her analysis of Wiradjuri fighting practices, even those Indigenous communities that have considerably longer contact histories are experiencing stress, not just those whose lives remain more ‘traditional’. Communities with longer contact histories do not display fewer signs of social stress and dysfunction. Regardless of the length of contact histories, high levels of violent incidences causing grievous bodily harm are occurring and increasing in Indigenous communities throughout Australia. The cause and extent of violence cannot be reduced to the span of contact history and whether or not communities have had ‘enough time’ to adjust to the external intrusions to ‘traditional culture’.

Looking from the outside, Indigenous communities appear to have high levels of unacceptable violence. While I do not dispute this in statistical terms, by not differentiating between the social contexts and types of violence taking place, non-Indigenous interpretations of what is occurring tend to only produce one explanation. Violent acts are exclusively associated with excessive alcohol consumption, which in turn is due to a deficit in social mores, and is endemic to low socio-economic status. Macdonald (1994:180) convincingly argues that, far from being indicative of the ravages of colonization, fighting in Wiradjuri communities served to transmit values and reinforce
features of social structure that displayed significant continuities with Wiradjuri meanings that had roots in pre-colonial forms of social order and control over time. ‘Whilst by outward appearances Kooris in central New South Wales may seem to have lost touch with their traditional social patterns, they reveal in the fight … traits and values which have always given, and continue to give them their distinctive Wiradjuri world view’. Although she acknowledges the recent escalation in ‘dirty fighting’ her observations act as a cautionary tale. Rather than flagging violence as somehow indicative of an Indigenous incapacity to cope with modernity, considerations of the ways Indigenous socialities have adapted and remained distinct in many parts of Australia must be taken into account. Colonialism and modernity did not in past reduce all Aboriginal people to drunkenness and violent abuse of kin.

**Politics of Difference**

In recent years a discourse has emerged critiquing the limitations inherent in the politics of difference taking place in modern liberal democratic nation states. As in so many areas of Indigenous-state relations the reparation of Indigenous Australian’s social, political, cultural and economic standing has been something of a double-edged sword.

The emergence of a politics of difference in Australia during the 1970s saw the conception of a pan-Aboriginal political body. As a distinct political identity, this homogenously conceived entity was the target of state policy aimed to redress issues of social equity, understood as shorthand for issues concerned with material conditions of living, health, education and other forms of equal opportunity. As Macdonald (1997:77) observed in her analysis of Wiradjuri desires, the righting of social injustices through land rights legislation was addressed to an homogenized Aboriginal population and contained a ‘one size fits all’ approach. Land rights as a symbol of social equity and redeployment of
citizen rights ‘was able to bind together people with disparate values, meanings, and agendas’. To a degree, a process of homogenisation was a necessary requirement for the founding stages of Indigenous rights movements in Australia in that it enabled relations between Indigenous Australians and the state to engage within a politics of identity and difference. However, failure on the part of the state to realise that the collective identity of a pan-Aboriginality would necessarily diverge into recognition of multiple Indigenous identities, with differing needs and desires, proved to be a major problem. Initially serving to as a way of voicing common concerns and achieving political recognition within the Australian nation-state, a pan-Aboriginal identity became contradictory because it could not accommodate the diversity present within Indigenous Australia. The united front of a ‘one mob’ Aboriginal identity was translated by policy makers into a model of the liberal democratic society, emphasising the equality of all members, the common good and the need to redistribute resources equitably, irrespective of hierarchies or merit’ (Macdonald 1997:65).

The intra-community conflicts increasing within Wiradjuri communities was not only an outcome of engagement with the dominant order, but was also generated by the disputes over political and economic agendas between Wiradjuri people themselves. Macdonald (1997) draws attention to the manner in which discourses of ‘recognition’, evidenced in the emergence of self-determination and land rights, came into conflict with discourses on ‘equity’, and the associated socio-economic indicators of employment, education, housing, and health. The conflation of issues concerned with ‘recognition’ and ‘equity’ became problematic, leading to tensions within Indigenous communities that were rarely understood outside of that cultural milieu.
Macdonald (1997) argues that under-recognition on the part of the government of the intra-political dimensions amongst Wiradjuri was borne out of neglect in considering heterogeneity and variable histories. Aboriginal people in NSW had long been engaged with non-Indigenous life-ways, and many had been subject to displacement throughout their contact histories. The presence of the Native Title Act 1993 (NTA) in NSW manner exacerbated rifts between ‘traditional’ Wiradjuri, those who had remained on or could claim a continuity of relation to traditional land, and ‘historical’ people, who could no longer claim continuity of occupation on traditional lands because they had chosen or been forced to leave, or had been living for generations on land not traditionally theirs, but where the original custodians were no longer alive. By maintaining ‘traditionalism’ as the basis for land rights and native title claims ‘indigenous identity and culture must put itself through a trial, and demonstrate its members’ authenticity by proving that their existence has remained largely consistent and continuous with a traditional past’ (Morris 2003:140). Such restrictions on land claim criteria prove difficult, not only for people who have managed to remain ‘on country’ through Australia’s colonial, and post-colonial history, but they exclude from the process of land rights Indigenous people who have been subject to a history of contact that forced them to move from ‘traditional country’.

Rifts such as those arising between ‘traditional’ and historic’ Aboriginal people are often misinterpreted by non-Indigenous people as evidence of ‘cultural breakdown’ reflected in disintegrating community order. And Indigenous people themselves have assessed the rising tensions in terms of ‘destructive white influences over which they no longer have control’ (Macdonald 1997:74). While acknowledging the merit in both views, Macdonald emphasises the degree to which such social disturbances may also be regarded as ‘evidence that traditions of political order are operative’ (1997:74), albeit in a contemporary manner that finds such traditional political domains also contested.
Macdonald (1997:74) continues:

It is the attempt by people who wish to define themselves as outside that order, by manipulating the mainstream system in contravention of it, that gives rise to many conflicts. Thus, tension is due not merely to the imposition of alien structures, but to the way in which these are played off against traditional structures of relationship and value

Within the constricted political floor space that Indigenous people find themselves afforded on the national stage, it is little wonder that ‘traditional and historical people’ find themselves increasingly polarised. Desire for social equity are at the forefront of the political agenda for all Indigenous peoples, however the modes by which this may be achieved are increasingly being aligned with neo-liberalist understandings of ‘equity’ that have their origins in European notions of liberal democratic society. What Macdonald has outlined as a ‘politics of recognition’, those movements invested in land rights, native title and self-determination, is a politics increasingly being assigned to ‘traditional people’. The ‘politics of recognition’ should not be (though often is) conflated with a ‘politics of equity’ as it refers to ‘lifestyle improvements [in] housing, employment, education and access to legal and medical services’ (Macdonald 1997:73), and have all too often been assumed as appropriate remedies to Aboriginal social malaise. The two ‘politics’, though inter-related, have proved to have different functions in Indigenous people’s political agendas.

Morris’ (2003) discussion of the Yorta Yorta Native Title Claim further highlights some of the problems arising from diverse socio-cultural histories of Indigenous Australians and the ways in which state recognition is realised. Restriction placed on criteria for successful land claims, Morris argued, further denied ‘political rights and the possibility of economic independence’ for those Indigenes who had been subject to colonial histories that had
removed them from traditional country, thus denying them a social domain that fostered
the continuity of ‘traditional’ cultural practices. He argued that adherence to
‘traditionalism’ in determining legitimacy of land claims ‘reaffirms the ongoing reality of
government dependency or mainstream assimilation as the only options for the majority of
indigenous people’ (Morris 2003:137). For many individuals, claims of ‘cultural
continuity’ required by the ‘traditionalist’ focus of legislation, is unrealistic. The
demarcation between ‘traditional’ and ‘historical’ people of Wiradjuri country is a clear
example of the types of problems that arise from the underlying assumption of
homogeneity of Aboriginal society. For many Indigenous peoples within ‘settled’
Australia unbroken continuity of ‘traditional’ practices is often tenuous. Economic
competition, state interventions, and missions all led to removal from country, and ensured
major disruptions to ‘traditional’ practices. The significant point relevant to the present
discussion however is what ‘kind’ of Aboriginal person the state recognises. Native Title
legislation’s restricted recognition of authority based on traditional rights excluded a large
group of the Wiradjuri population who were not provided with alternative avenues through
which to secure avenues providing opportunities for social equity.

Povinelli (1998) has also critiqued the ways in which the Australian state has recognised
alterity. Positioning her analysis within a wider discourse concerning liberal
multiculturalism she views native title legislation primarily as a means of reparation of
past state acts deplorable in their treatment of Indigenous Australians. Though thought to
be integral to the policy of ‘self-management’, signifying recognition of ‘Aboriginal
culture’ and acknowledging its value, Povinelli argues that the state’s application of native
title is in fact more a tool of government manipulation than a legitimate attempt to raise
Indigenous peoples standing in Australia and secure Indigenous identity equal footing with
Euro-Australian socio-cultural values. The particular way in which native title is
recognised is part of a broader facade of tokenistic ‘multiculturalism’, reinforcing values and ethics that are in fact part of a homogenising process of social ordering. Indigenous Australians were thought to retain their native title interests in land if traditional customs, beliefs and practices that primarily defined their distinction of identity were preserved, but as Povinelli highlights it was only ‘traditions’ that fit the purpose of the state seeking its own redemption through national reparation and reconciliation that fit the bill. Traditions less ‘palatable’ to liberal democratic society were swept aside in favour of a cleansed, less radical alterity.

Clitoridectomies, ritual group sex, murder, and certain marriage practices, for instance, shamed the common law and the nation’s core values. These Aboriginal traditions had no legal standing: they were allowed to exist only as nostalgic traces of a past, fully authentic Aboriginal tradition. (Povinelli 1998:583)

The type of ‘multiculturalism’ pursued by the Australian state is one that, whilst claiming acceptance of difference, in fact limits the differentiation it is willing to accommodate, and thus is merely a form of Western cultural hegemony that has disguised its forms of power within the rhetoric of tolerance and recognition of ‘difference’. The ‘Aboriginal subjects’ accepted by the state are limited in the degree to which they can display culturally distinct identities. Povinelli argues that the state is only capable of accepting sanitised forms of otherness, a form of diversity that poses no threat to Western liberal sensibilities. A politics of ‘recognition’ through multicultural discourse is successful in part because it inspires ‘subaltern and minority subjects to identify with the colonizers ... [and the] impossible object of an authentic self-identity; in the case of indigenous Australians, a domesticated nonconfictual “traditional” form of sociality and (inter)subjectivity’
(Povinelli 2002:6). Potentially radical forms of difference are given no room in the nation’s ideal self image, therefore Indigenous subjects are required to ‘desire and identify in a way that just so happens, in an uncanny convergence of interests, to fit the national imaginary’ (Povinelli 1998:578).

Merlan’s (1998) application of ‘mimesis’ (Taussig 1993) to Indigenous peoples’ relations with the Australian nation-state supports a position similar to that of Povinelli. The discursive space provided to an Indigenous socio-political presence through ‘self-determination’ policies differentiated itself from the previous coercive era of assimilation by claiming a ‘progressive’ philosophical basis. Merlan (1998:viii), recognised that, as a minority group, Aborigines have been ‘highly susceptible to others’ representations of who and what they are’ and have been limited to engaging in a politics of difference that values only a particular mode of Aboriginality, one more in line with the dominant order’s projected representations of indigenous selves, as opposed to any accurate reflections of notions of Aboriginality in all its guises. With the shift in governmental Aboriginal affairs policies since the 1970s from ‘assimilation’ to ‘self-determination’, Merlan (1998:viii) argued that there had also been an increase in national concern as to the constitution of the ‘indigenous ‘self’’, stating that it has been the ‘basis of reconstitutive measures, including land rights in the Northern Territory’. The increased interest in the indigenous ‘self’, was accompanied by a politics of difference that came to reflect Australian nation-state sanctioned modes of Aboriginality that Indigenous peoples themselves have, to a degree, had to absorb in order to partake in the projects of reparation.

Merlan illustrates how notions of Aboriginality exclusively deferring to past models of socio-territorial relationships do so at the expense of contemporary socio-cultural formations. The Katherine Area Land Claim is one example where the constraints of
‘traditionalizing strictures’ contributed to undermining the legitimacy of the claimants relationship to country. The counsel for the Northern Territory assessed the claimants and their evidence ‘with the clan group model of traditional ownership in mind’ (Merlan 1998:170). This was despite the fact that the anthropologists’ report in the Katherine case had indicated that the clan group model was not currently the most relevant level at which the claimants conceptualized their relations to country’ (Merlan 1998:171).

Many of the Jawoyn claimants were uncertain ‘about the actual locations of places they associated with particular clans, and a great number of potential claimants, especially younger people, simply did not evince a sense of relationship to country as mediated by clan-level concepts.(Merlan 1998:171)

The once salient clan-level relationships to country had been ‘dissipated by the refocusing and narrowing of Aboriginal people’s experience of country around the possibilities and requirements of the changing settler regime’ (Merlan 1998:171). That clan-level organisation was initially deemed the most appropriate level at which to judge relationship to country was indicative of the ‘pragmatic and conceptual constraints’ of land claim processes to interpret the contemporary character of Aboriginal socio-cultural formations reflecting ‘long-term intercultural processes’ (Merlan 1998:173-74). Merlan observed that it was not so much that constructs of ‘clan’ were without relevance to Jawoyn people and their contemporary subjectivities, rather it was the manner in which the state applied such notions. Understanding ‘clan’ to be a fixed and structurally unchanging mode of social organization was not only outdated, it was historically inaccurate as it failed to incorporate the changes that had taken place within Indigenous socio-cultural formations with the advent of European settlement. Though land rights legislations was thought to be a way in which to incorporate and recognise many Indigenous Australians, the application of a
limited and inflexible understanding of ‘clan’, one that was grounded in traditionalism, had the potential to exclude many from land claim processes.

The duplicitous nature of the Australian nation-state’s forms of recognition of Indigenous land rights works to direct the sorts of projects pursued by Indigenous peoples, ones more likely to be sanctioned by the state. Merlan’s analysis of the imitative relations between Indigenous peoples and the Australian state reveals that though the coercive nature of Indigenous /state relations is often relegated to the past era of assimilation, it in fact remains very much part of contemporary Indigenous/ state dynamics. What the state seeks to elicit from Indigenous citizens is a ‘culturally distinct’ mode of Indigeneity, whose management and organisation is sufficiently compatible with neo-liberal modes of governance. With the maturation of the Australian nation-state and its reflective concepts of Australian nationhood seemingly embracing Aboriginal Australia, both in recognition of past deplorable policies and self-congratulations on contemporary recognition through land rights, the nation-state also reconceptualises notions of Aboriginality. As Merlan (1998:180) observes, this is done so through redeploying representations of Aboriginality through engaging with ‘images partaking of continuity with the past but also yielding definitively new intercultural products and representations’. Contemporary conceptions of Aboriginal selfhood are always in relation to the image of the modern Australian nation and as much influenced by the ‘intercultural production’ of identity, as generated from any kind of autonomous domain of Indigeneity. Merlan (1998:180) argued that the intercultural production of Aboriginal identity is responsible for the ‘social technology of mimesis’ that generates an Aboriginality often more in line with the nation-states projects than reflecting Aboriginal people themselves: a representative mode of Indigeneity that is, for all intents and purposes, a form of ‘aping’. This analysis resonates with Fanon’s (1966) analysis of successful hegemonic domination as able to be measured in terms of subalterns
becoming the orchestrators in implementing of dominant state’s projects; mirroring desires and aspirations of those they are dominated by.

Increasingly, issues of representation as major sites of conflicting constructions of the ‘self’ and authentic, acceptable indigenous identity have demanded the attentions of anthropologists wanting to contribute to critiques on a politics of difference and the forms it has taken in Australia (see for example Cowlishaw 2004; Povinelli 2002). Such critiques address anxieties about cultural diversity and the extent to which heterogeneity within a national identity politics can be accommodated. What can be done with a problematic recognition of Indigenous rights in the context of wider concerns for equality of citizenship within the nation-state? Are the two reconcilable? How will public recognition of the differentiation within and between Aboriginal communities bear on the overall politics of identity being played out on the wider national stage? An ‘Aboriginality’ that has competing identities provides additional complexity to the legislative and policy intentions of Federal and State governments. Improving the circumstances and quality of life for the Indigenous population had not previously been considered to be so complex. Not only are the demands amongst Indigenous groups more varied than previously acknowledged by the various government institutions engaged with Aboriginal affairs policy development, the dynamics of what underpins this variation is proving difficult to articulate with the dominant neo-liberalist order.

The Impact of Welfare

Though seen as integral to the rights afforded to citizens, the role that welfare has played in the conditioning of Indigenous communities has never been far from consideration. Of particular interest here is the manner in which welfare funding for Indigenous people has often attracted negative connotations in the broader public arena with the recurring theme
of welfare as ‘hand out’ and is frequently perceived as a hindrance to Indigenous economic independence. In the broad context of public perceptions Aboriginals and welfare have come to be synonymous with each other. Morris (1997:167) writes:

Aboriginal people are pejoratively defined by their real or assumed place within, or relationship to, welfare services. However, the representations go further than simply asserting a social fact… they identify Aborigines as inherently inferior, a fact, in turn, allegedly verifiable by their dependency upon social welfare and their perceived utilization of ‘taxpayers’ money’.

Such perceptions converge with neo-liberal principles on the role welfare should play within nation-state relations to citizens. The ‘dependency’ associated with Indigenous receipt of welfare casts state services as buttressing a lifestyle supplemented by ‘sit down money’, with little consideration towards the types of social benefits received.

In the literature that focuses on the role welfare has played in the current Aboriginal social malaise there have been two key approaches. It has been criticized for harbouring Indigenous dependency on the state (Pearson 2000), or viewed as a repackaged mode of state control (Beckett 1988).

The most recent, and perhaps most widely drawn on in the public domain, is the explanation offered by Noel Pearson (2000). Pearson’s analysis takes account of the effects of ‘passive welfare’ and rethinks the role that ‘progressive policy’ approaches have played in the current state of many Indigenous communities. His observations bring to the fore the need to rethink the ways in which Indigenous policy development is approached. Pearson’s publication in 2000 recaptured some of the Federal Government’s attention to Aboriginal affairs. Pearson’s views on ‘passive welfare’ became the timely ‘whipping boy’ of the Howard Coalition’s neo-liberal critique of previous progressive policy,
regenerating debate around the appalling social breakdown and material conditions of many Indigenous communities, in particular in remote areas. Nevertheless, it is somewhat of an oversimplification to hold ‘the paradigm of passive welfare’ as the scepter for Indigenous malaise. ‘Sit down money’ over extended periods of time is known to have detrimental effects on overall social well-being, and inter-generational dependence on government benefits closely correlates with other indicators of socio-economic marginalisation. Pearson does not differentiate between the types of welfare received, whether it be an old age pension, family allowance, or unemployment benefit, he argues that they are all susceptible to the demands of the ‘drinking circles’, and so contribute to the diminished quality of life now featured in Indigenous Australia. According to Pearson ‘passive welfare’ has and is corrupting the basis of Indigenous laws and customs because it interferes with established hierarchies. The economic independence occasioned by passive welfare for many, particularly the youth of communities, has seen a breakdown in social responsibility and deferral to elders.

While Pearson’s conclusion is problematic, in part because it focuses too narrowly on a direct cause and effect relationship, many of the points he raises are valid. He points to the inappropriateness of many of the economic reform models applied to Indigenous Australians and their affairs. However, as observed by Peterson (1998:106), the focus on ‘delivery of entitlements rather than on their reception and use’ mitigates the importance of preparing people sufficiently for engaging in the wider Australian society as fully formed, and thus contributing, citizens. Such a focus reflects the general orientation of neoliberal concern being on ‘individual’ capacity to become a valued contributor, rather than a drain on economic resources. What is concerning about Pearson’s view are that the solutions offered are couched in terms of neo-liberalist notions of mutual obligation, individualism, and responsibility, with very little appreciation of the differences in the
moral orders that direct Indigenous participation in socio-economic pursuits. Furthermore, Pearson’s critique did not capture the complex social, cultural, political and economic dynamics currently informing contemporary experience, nor properly acknowledged the historical engagements prior to the welfare era that had already produced traces of the problems now afflicting many communities. For example, in 1932 while in the Northern Territory, still then regarded as frontier country, W. E. H. Stanner wrote of local patterns of Aboriginal- non-Aboriginal paternalistic relations producing high levels of dependence and poverty. He wrote of ‘bad blood, frequent fighting, and much talk of sorcery and poison’ (Stanner 2009:177) amongst the Aboriginal groups themselves. This tension in the socio-cultural world of the local Aborigines was underscored by European exploitation in which:

Aborigines were looked on and used almost as free goods…were given little pay…[ and in which there was not ] a single element in the whole system, of life- land, food, shelter, jobs, pay, the safety of women and children, even access to the protection of the law- in which they were not at great disadvantage, and without remedy. (Stanner 2009:177)

The problems occurring in the communities he observed are echoed in those Pearson identifies in Hopevale. The essence of Stanner’s concerns whereby ‘every act of paternalism deepened the poverty into pauperism and the dependence into inertia’, where the ‘situation was self-perpetuating and self-reinforcing’ (Stanner 2009:208) are applicable to contemporary Indigenous experiences. ‘Passive welfare’ would have to ‘take a number’ so to speak, in the line-up of contributing factors to Indigenous social malaise.

In a similar vein, Beckett’s (1988) discussion of ‘welfare colonialism’ points to the deleterious effects associated with gaining citizenship status, namely access to welfare
benefits. He concludes that the ‘dependency’ ensured by receipt of benefits was always going to be naturalised into present-day constructs of Aboriginality because of the historical processes of colonisation and the resulting institutionalisation of social and economic marginality. Beckett argued that the ‘Aboriginal problem’ was conceived in two ways, both of which were directly related to the legacy of colonial contact history and previous efforts by government to ‘deal’ with the Aboriginal population. Both ways were epitomised in the media attention that Aboriginal social, economic, and cultural issues were receiving during Australia’s bicentenary in 1988. On the one hand the ‘problem’ was constructed in terms of issues of ‘ill-health, poor housing, unemployment, denial of civil rights, discrimination’ and, on the other, were concerns of ‘parasitism, alcoholism, unacceptable conduct, vulnerability to agitators’ (Beckett 1988:4).

Beckett (1988:14) drew on Paine’s (1977) concept of ‘welfare colonialism’, that combined the ideology of ‘citizenship (welfare) and its denial (colonialism)’, to describe the contradictory nature of the policies implemented by nation state governments in their efforts to ameliorate the socio-economic conditions in which Indigenous peoples found themselves. For Beckett, ‘welfare colonialism is part of the political practice of the liberal democratic nation state which is aimed at maintaining a measure of social harmony and equity internally, and an image of moral rectitude in the world at large’(Beckett 1988:14). He argued that the receipt of welfare benefits had been the primary mode by which Indigenous peoples had become incorporated into the nation state. His analysis of ‘the Aboriginal problem’ centered on the relationship between the state and Indigenous peoples and their change in status through the granting of citizenship.

In his critique of ‘welfare colonialism’ Peterson (1998:101) points out that, as a framework, it tends ‘to privilege the political to the neglect of the economic and cultural’.
It does so by being unable to incorporate an account of indigenous experience that captures both the instances of convergence and divergence of differing life-worlds. The political drive behind granting indigenous citizenship was concerned with rectifying ‘long-standing social injustice, discrimination and inequality’ (Peterson 1998:101) and did not consider the possibility that the new status would be ‘a substantive threat to the sources of [Aboriginal] relative autonomy’. When certain ‘dilemmas related to citizenship’ (Peterson 1998:102) began to emerge, ‘welfare colonialism’ could not highlight how Indigenous people were responding to the dilemmas they were faced with. Full citizenship for Indigenous peoples has been far from unproblematic. Whilst ‘welfare colonialism’ showed that state structures and institutions have the capacity to be as ‘debilitating as [they are] beneficial of the social and political dependencies it creates’ (Peterson 1998:101) as a concept it failed to capture how these forces intersect with the minutiae of daily experience. As important as the broad structural issues of inequity are, there is also a need to consider the transformative effects to Indigenous socio-cultural worlds that the new regime of inclusion through citizenship entailed. To understand Aboriginal citizenship as an exercise in colonial domination alone does not actually account for the seemingly correlative relationship between Indigenous welfare dependency and Indigenous well-being. Welfare colonialism cannot accommodate the ways in which ‘a particular economic persona for the model Australian citizen’ (Peterson 1998:111) potentially interferes with certain cultural pursuits by Indigenous people, nor the subsequent dilemmas that arise from conflicting notions of person. Relegating economic issues to a secular political arena, assumes economic orders are not also moral orders, and denies the transformative effects on Indigenous culture.

The extent to which welfare can be found culpable in producing the social malaise in many Indigenous communities seems a timely deliberation in the socio-political climate of
neo-liberalism now encompassing Australia. But, without considering the implications that, for example, the ‘consumption ethic’ of neo-liberalism has on Indigenous moral, economic, political, and social domains, ‘welfare colonialism’ offers a limited account of Indigenous experience relegating the ‘cultures of engagement between the two ways of life’ as always an engagement producing a ‘culture of dependency’ (Peterson 1998:113). The political focus of ‘welfare colonialism’ obscures the importance of Indigenous notions of being in the world, and how this informs the manner in which Indigenous people often choose to interact with the dominant structural institutions of the democratic nation state.

**Persons and Moral Orders**

It has become an accepted truth under neo-liberalism and consumer capitalism (see Bourdieu 1998:29-44) that Western notions of personhood are constructed around the accumulation of commodities deemed valuable by capitalist society. Access to, and control over, resources form the basis of an individual’s power, and the social status of the individual is assessed by an ability to accumulate socially-valued wealth and commodities. ‘I own, therefore I am’ is the twenty first century’s mantra for self conceptualisation. In contrast, Indigenous notions of the self are constructed and understood in terms of one’s ability to accumulate social wealth through meaningful relationships (which included access to material resources). The activation of kin-networks and the maintenance of such ties are central to an understanding of self (see, for instance, Macdonald 2000, Myers 1982, 1986, Poirier 2005). Material objects feature prominently in Indigenous lives, but it is not commodities by which they objectify their personhood. Value placed on material objects is not inherently thought to be in and of themselves, but rather objects act as the as medium through which relatedness is expressed (Macdonald 2000).
Macdonald’s (2000) analysis of the role demand-sharing plays in notions of personhood among the Wiradjuri clearly outlines fundamental differences between the moral values of capitalist economies and the modernist self, and Indigenous notions of personhood. Aboriginal moral codes and kinship frameworks are more concerned with how to be uniquely oneself in the context of obligations and concerns which involve a deep relatedness to significant others (Macdonald 2000:10).

An appreciation of the ways in which relatedness and sharing inform Indigenous conceptions of personhood must also recognise the different ontology instructing their lives. Macdonald’s analysis of the distinctive meanings of the terms ‘sharing’ and ‘caring’ in Wiradjuri society give critical insight to the fundamental differences in the notions of ‘self’ in Indigenous and non-Indigenous society. Macdonald’s study illustrates that for the Wiradjuri ‘life is first of all social’ and thus their economic arrangements are set up in a way that ‘augments and gives expression’ to that sociality (Macdonald 2000:3). In light of the importance placed on the social aspect of life ‘economics are not simply about production and consumption but also about distribution and circulation’ (2000:3). It is important to recognise that ‘sharing’ in the context of Indigenous society is not solely generated by the need to ensure equitable resource distribution where these are scarce in traditional hunter-gatherer modes of economy, or in the modern context, a response to poverty.

If we understand that the practice of demand-sharing is the primary mode through which objectifications of self occur in Indigenous society, the focal point of what is regarded as valuable and why begins to shift away from identity being embodied in cash and commodities, as in societies throughout the first world. Indigenous constructions of the ‘self’ are located within forms of sociality that are animated and maintained through the
practice of demand-sharing. ‘Sharing’ allows a person to meet the social expectations of what it is to be a good relative, and that means a valued and ‘good’ person among kin-orientated Indigenous societies (cf. Austin-Broos 2003, 2009; Martin 1995; Peterson 1993; Schwab 1995).

The obligations and responsibilities expected to be honoured within the kin based domestic economy of Indigenous social worlds develops a mode of sociality and moral order that contrasts markedly with the individuation found at the centre of the dominant market- based economic order. The practice of demand-sharing (Peterson 1993) embodies fundamental notions of moral personhood that run counter to the moral order expressed in neo-liberal economies (Austin-Broos 1996).
3 Neo-liberal Economy and Beyond

In order to understand why the encompassing neo-liberal socio-economic order is proving to be a difficult domain for Indigenous Australians to reproduce meaningful and valued cultural practices there are some key features to be extracted. Granted, economists might not necessarily agree with such points considered being key, but they are central to deciphering some of the processes now occurring in Indigenous Australia and understanding how people are attempting to articulate with the dominant order. The theories set out in Chapters One and Two help identify the drivers in neo-liberalism that contribute to the devolution of progressive social policies and the manner in which they are proving to be detrimentally intrusive to Aboriginal cultural practices.

Neo-liberalism is a political-economic strategy. It refers to a shift in social, political and economic outlook that began to emerge globally in the 1970s. It is a particular form of economic ideology that promotes a minimisation of government intervention in the economy, instead favouring unregulated participation in the free-market. In the broadest sense of the term, neo-liberalism as an ideology is primarily concerned with the maximisation of profit and efficiency through engagement in free-market and trade, where the unimpeded flow of capital will produce overall social well-being as a positive by-product of the trickle-down effect of the good form in free-market models.

With the government’s primary role being redefined to ensure the maximisation of economic efficiency there are adjustments necessary to state priorities and functions. There is a reduction in government spending for general infrastructure and in departments of programme and service delivery that have traditionally been areas of non-profit. Such cuts in government expenditure translate to a reduction of available funding for education,
health, income security and community services, and encourages the need to stimulate private investment in these areas. In addition there is also reduced expenditure on basic maintenance for areas such as roads, public transport, hospitals and the like. In recent years this shift in government funding has necessitated a retraction in the ‘welfare state’ on the basis that receipt of welfare stifles ‘private initiative, and its commitment to equalising wealth’ (Mendes 2008:5). The obligations and responsibilities governments hold to their citizens have been realigned in efforts to reduce social welfare budgets. This shift is couched in terms of creating a more competitive employment market for citizens, and notions of ‘mutual obligation’ have become the status quo. Terms such as ‘voluntary exchange’ and ‘user pays’ are central to the lexicon of the economically rational policy shifts over the past thirty years, with the role of ‘welfare’ now firmly based in the rhetoric of ‘clients and consumers’.

There is also deregulation in areas that pose a threat to the efficiency and maximisation of economic profit. An unregulated market is seen as the only way to increase economic growth and this entails providing opportunities for foreign investment through reducing business restrictions and trade tariffs. The labour force is also deregulated in the name of minimising unemployment through the mitigation of collective bargaining agreements of unionised workers, renegotiation of wage rates, and readjustments to health and safety standards in the workplace.

In order to explore the ways in which neo-liberalism has impacted on Indigenous Australia an understanding of neo-liberalism needs to be extended beyond that of a set of prescriptive economic rules for free-market engagement. The understanding of neo-liberal socio-economics used in this thesis draws on Austin-Broos’ (1996:178) formulation of the free-market, and the neo-liberal culture in which it is now embedded as ‘themselves moral
orders of a type; orders of value embedded in a now diffuse Western world marked by specific institutional features.’ In this light, rather than understanding the economics of neo-liberalism as a form of abstracted mathematical equation, the market, and the logic within which it is situated is considered ‘a particular meaningful order with particular value orientations and not others’ (Austin-Broos 1996:178). Considerations of moral orders, that is ‘the order of values and meanings through which subjects are defined within a cultural milieu’ (Austin- Broos 1997:8), offers a way of understanding the current social malaise in many Indigenous communities. The dilemmas confronting Indigenous peoples’ constitutions of ‘self’ and maintenance of cultural specificity have arisen, I argue, in direct context to this new moral economy.

Central to this discussion is the manner in which neo-liberalism has altered the concept of personhood and valued social beings within first world nation states. Of particular interest is the way in which neoliberal ideology conceptualises the role of the ‘individual’ in society and the role of the state vis-à-vis its citizens. In the name of market based competition, neo-liberalism has redefined obligations to citizens. This has been achieved mainly through a ‘shift away from directly providing for the basic needs of their marginalized citizens to helping these citizens to govern themselves and take care of their own development needs’ (Gupta and Sharma 2006:284). Neoliberal socio-economics aims to imbue the individual with a sense of emancipation through their engagement with the free market. It is, Comaroff and Comaroff have observed:

[The] millennial capitalism of the moment: a capitalism that presents itself as a gospel of salvation; a capitalism that, if rightly harnessed, is invested with the capacity wholly to transform the universe of the marginalized and disempowered (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, cited in Comaroff and Comaroff 2001:2).
This quality of ‘salvation’ is promoted as one of neo-liberalism’s most appealing attributes. However, the premise on which the ‘opportunity for all’ rhetoric is based is a false one. Bauman (2004) describes the way in which many ‘individuals’ struggle unsuccessfully to cope with the expectations of advanced capitalism (neo-liberalism) and its associated moral order and are rendered ‘human waste’. This relegation to the refuse pile of humanity is represented as the failure of individuals to seize opportunities provided by the free-market for self-betterment, as well as a failure to contribute in a valued way to trans-global capitalist society.

It is interesting to note the change in strategy that the dominant ‘Western’ order has practiced in recent decades. Fanon (1966) argued that it was precisely the processes of mimicry and the desire to be included in the dominant colonising orders by which the colonised rendered themselves wretched. Today in Australia the process has been reversed. It is a combination of the state’s reluctance to provide adequate access to resources, or support in culturally appropriate economic pursuits, that positions Indigenous peoples on the margins of society. The persistence of the culturally specific modes of kin-based economies are regarded as hurdles to economic assimilation, and as such result in exclusion from the dominant neo-liberal order, and in the process renders them ‘human waste’. Macdonald (2010) illustrates how policies of self-management encumbered Indigenous peoples with organizational structures, bureaucratic expectations and forms of accountability destructive to Aboriginal senses of selves. Aboriginal-run organizations encountered ‘problems with modes of decision making, forms of representation, the disjunctures between kin-reations and the bureaucratic roles that were now imposed on them’(Macdonald 2010:61). Adherence to kin obligations could not translate in to the expectations that accompanied the accountability of receipt of state funding:
In the Wiradjuri case, as elsewhere, Aboriginal people blamed each other for the unseen structures making entirely new demands of people’s relations with each other. One minute people were kin, sisters, the next minute one sister had become the chairperson of an organization determined to evict the other sister for not paying rent...kin are supposed to privilege kin. (Macdonald 2010:61)

The conflicts that often arose between kin-obligations and bureaucratic process were little understood by government bodies who were often left scratching their heads as to why these seemingly ameliorative policies regularly failed. Mowbray (1986) also discusses self-management within liberal democracy and how the way in which it is conceived mistakenly assumes a level of overlap in structures of hierarchy and authority relations in Aboriginal social organisation. In reality many state structures intrinsically run counter to hierarchal configurations in Indigenous communities. Indigenous privileging of kin based obligations inevitably led to exclusion from processes and institutions aimed at improving incorporation of Indigenous Australians because the disjunctures between logics was often too great. The apparent failures of self-management were ultimately interpreted as an Indigenous inability to manage themselves, which legitimated more state intervention, which in turn confirmed Indigenous inability, thus further entrenching exclusion from the dominant order.

As Wright (2003:124) has observed, there are implied links between certain assumptions that drive neo-liberal socio-economic pursuits and the themes present in social Darwinism. The logic underlying neo-liberal ideology and the competition that engagement with the free-market promotes is a process ‘analogous to Darwin’s natural selection ... whereby
organisms in the natural environment struggle for existence against their rivals: the unfit are eliminated and only the fit survive’ (Wright 2003:124). This underlying logic, in conjunction with an emerging emphasis on ‘the cult of the individual’ (Durkheim 1984) forms a central tenet of neo-liberal ideology: namely, individuals, through the provision of free-market competition, are presented with ‘equal’ opportunities for acquiring wealth, and are solely responsible for their own economic success, regardless of their initial inequalities. This rationale renders those bereft of cash and commodities as deserving of their situation. People reap what they sow, as it were: economic success, which increasingly becomes the marker and determinant of social status, gains a moral dimension. As advocates for neo-liberalism assert, economic management gives individuals ‘the amount of wealth they deserve; [neo-liberalism] is ‘natural’ because it enables the (economically) fit to thrive’ (Wright 2003: ix).

However, there is an important oversight in the underlying assumptions of equal opportunity. The assumed ‘equalisation’ fails to recognise that as participants in a heterogeneous global ‘society’, many ‘individuals’ are subject to socio-cultural differentiations that not only inform a set of socio-economic priorities that are often different to the dominant order, they may also render them less inclined to pursue wealth through the avenues provided by a dominant moral order saturated in neo-liberalist ideology.

**The Politics of Moral Order**

In the contemporary climate of neo-liberalism it is largely anticipated by the governing powers that Indigenous Australians will become increasingly engaged with the market economy as the benefits for doing so become self evident. There is little thought given to how fuller incorporation into the market based economy may impact the overall well-
being of Indigenous Australians because economic prosperity is thought to directly promote overall welfare. In understanding how Indigenous notions of personhood are constructed however, it becomes clear that the dominant economic system is one that is plainly in contradiction with central values and ethics that inform the way in which notions of Indigenous personhood are constructed. Comaroff (1985:2-3) has, in context to the Barolong boo Ratshidi, a people on the margins of the South African state, pointed out that:

A socio-cultural order [that] stands in contrast with the mode of production [in modern First World societies], its dominant ideology, and its underlying semantic design - a world in which social and cultural continuities appear to be fractured and individuals, abruptly wrenched from their human and spiritual context, are no longer able to recognise or realise themselves.

Not only is this apt in the case of Indigenous Australians, it is also apparent that this fracturing is already taking place. Through consideration of neo-liberalism as the dominant moral order in which Indigenous Australians have to navigate their daily lives, a politics of moral order (Austin-Broos 1997) emerges as a germane way in which to assess what is occurring in Indigenous Australia. Incorporating social, economic, and historical particularity, a politics of moral order can offer an account of why Indigenous Australia is experiencing a level of social malaise, not previously matched. A politics of moral order considers the impacts of ontological violence and how Indigenous senses of well-being are responding to this recent mode of colonisation. My understanding of the current social malaise found in many Indigenous communities is that it is more than the culmination of generations of socio-economic marginality and oppression. Rather it is an expression of something occurring at the core of the Indigenous sense of self.
Important to this discussion is the way in which ideological notions gain expression through ‘both lived experience and explicit discourse’ (Comaroff 1985:5), and how in some instances these dual elements may be synchronised, and in other instances may be disjointed. The kin-based economic practices of Indigenous societies are expressions of notions of personhood informed by the obligations and responsibilities related to being a good and moral person. It is an arena that embodies the complementarities of lived experience and explicit discourse. Within the broader Australian context however we can see that the moral order of Indigenous Australians encompassed by the explicit discourse of neo-liberalism becomes a site of contestation, where explicit ideological discourse comes to shape a lived experience that runs counter to it. The imprint that neo-liberal ideology is leaving on Indigenous Australia is more permanent and demanding than previous state-modes of governance precisely because of the way in which it has reconstituted the relationship that citizens have with the state: they are now primarily regarded as consumers, which is a more radical change for Aboriginals than it is for other ‘modern selves’, for whom it is also frequently unsettling, but not as violently. The neo-liberal view abstracts economic practices out from the social arena in which they take place. As Bourdieu (1998:40) has observed, promoting the individualisation of everything is not always beneficial to the populace at large. The structural violence delivered to citizens through financial markets beholden to shareholders and profit margins does eventually produce forms of social suffering- ‘suicides, crime and delinquency, drug addiction, alcoholism, a whole host of minor and major everyday acts of violence’(Bourdieu 1998:40) – through its ability to alienate people from social mechanisms that previously provided succour for their senses of self.

What we see emerge from the ways in which Indigenous Australians are embedded within the neo-liberal order is that Indigenous notions of personhood are seen by advocates of
neo-liberal policy to be real cultural encumbrances to successful market economy engagement. And as ‘real’ market engagement is promoted and sought to replace the false economy of ‘passive welfare’ (Pearson 2000) without much consideration of the cultural implications that engagement in the market based economy has for them, the disordering capacity of the state’s focus on prescribed modes of economic engagement goes unnoticed. The failure to recognise the cultural nature of economy has in the neo-liberal discourse produced ‘forms of thinking and practice that naturalize [Indigenous Australians] and their social circumstance as the product of a moral deficit, deviance, or degeneracy’ (Austin-Broos 2005b:184).

Some of the ‘problems of articulation’ (Austin-Broos 2003) many Indigenous Australians are experiencing now between their domestic moral economy and the market economy are directly affecting the maintenance of specifically Indigenous notions of the self. I believe it is this pressure on Indigenous senses of self that is underscoring the acuteness of social malaise found in many parts of Indigenous Australia. As Austin-Broos (2003:119; see also, 2009) has illustrated through her examination of the articulation of Western Arrente kinship with welfare and work, although Western Arrente have successfully renegotiated the meanings and values imbued in cash and commodities to augment their moral economy of relatedness, when having to engage with the market economy and expectations of the state, ‘impasse is often the result’ because the values - both of things and of personhood, are not fluid between the opposing economies. The kin-economy, which is primarily concerned with the redistribution of things in order to cement social relationships, is seen as an impediment to the project of individual accumulation and financial independence at the heart of the neo-liberal state. In addition to the transformative power of kin relations in the use of cash and commodities that changes value and meaning, Peterson (2005:14) has suggested that dependence on cash and
commodities lacks a consumer ethic and, without such motivation, engagement in the market economy will remain irregular for Indigenous Australians:

In remote Australia Aboriginal people come from a historically low material base which, combined with the processes of the Indigenous domestic moral economy, work powerfully to reduce the level of consumer dependency. Only when people’s consumer dependency is a great deal higher than it is today, so that it cannot be maintained by transfer payment, subsidies, grants, loans, royalty payments, casual work ... can people be expected to become motivated and involved in the treadmill of wage labour, and the emphasis on circulation reduced.

With the emphasis in neo-liberal discourse being place on the redeeming qualities of economic engagement and the securing of well being that such engagement will bring, the activities of consumption, production and accumulation informed by the ‘millennial mode’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001) of capitalism, has come to be thought of as the avenue through which Indigenous Australia will achieve social equity. But issues of social equity are often divorced from cultural considerations, and issues concerning Indigenous Australians and economics have been no different. Peterson’s analysis of remote Indigenous peoples likely engagement with the market economy suggests that successful engagement with and full incorporation into the market economy will be at a cost to the domestic moral economy. People will ‘have to distance themselves in some way ... by moving ... by marrying somebody outside [the kin economy] or by adopting a completely different way of life’ (Peterson 2005:14). What Peterson identifies as a strategy to produce better economic outcomes, with the subsequent benefits to flow into the social domains, is measured by the Government ‘bean counters’ who are busy wanting to tick all the right boxes and sign-off on ‘targets’ met. Successful economic engagement, as defined by Government, is one that requires Indigenous people to actively disengage with a form of
sociality that instructs Indigenous moral orders. They are required to suppress their notions of personhood in order to partake in the dominant neo-liberal order in a manner considered appropriate by liberal democratic nation state orthodoxies. The separation of issues of social equity, addressed primarily through economic policy, from cultural considerations has allowed the formulation of policy goals to ‘assume that secular assimilation is possible ... that material circumstances can be substantially improved while leaving cultural heritage unchallenged’ (Peterson 1998:110).

In her discussion of the difficulties encountered by Western Arrente in trying to bridge the gap and reconcile the differences between kin and market economies, Austin-Broos (2006) further highlights ‘problems of articulation’. Government policy aimed at addressing discrepancies in material circumstances through the development of employment opportunities in the local economy is often thwarted because it has major implications for the ways in which Western Arrernte organise their social fields of value. Well-being for the Western Arrernte, and many other Indigenous Australians, is primarily derived from the pursuit and confirmation of ‘relatedness’ within the networks of the kin economy.

They invest both cash and commodities with contextual meanings that have more to do with servicing relatedness than with functional tasks of market economy. ‘Work’ in a market sense therefore lacks salience. (Austin-Broos 2006:3)

The conflicts occurring between the maintenance of ‘relatedness’ and a fuller engagement in the market economy promoted by the state is elaborated through the concepts of ‘working for’ and ‘work’ among Western Arrernte. Austin-Broos describes how, for Indigenous Australians negotiating with the encapsulating order whilst trying to maintain social practices that preference a value orientation markedly different from that order, the
outcomes often fall short of both orders expectations. As the following abridged account provided by Austin-Broos (2006:6-7) shows, it is in efforts by the Western Arrente to reconcile the two concepts that ‘problems about work’ emerge as ‘a real cultural impasse’:

Rudy was a Tjuwanpa mechanic and a Centralian. Though he kept his domestic domain rigidly privatised from Aborigines he was reputed to work well with local people. Michael came from an outstation west of Tjuwanpa. He was a mature, young Arrente man on his mother’s side. Through his father he had pastoral experience and worked on his own place mustering feral camels. He came in to Ntaria and sought work because a relative had died and he was doing ‘sorry’ in Ntaria. Rudy gave him training work in the garage, not least because he liked Michael who, in turn was reputed to have ritual knowledge. [Rudy] began to teach Michael the mechanic’s craft. After a while, things grew tense as Michael first demanded cash from Rudy who could easily refuse kids but felt awkward with this man. Then Michael began to refuse to do certain tasks that Rudy himself took for granted. As a cultural fact, at no time could Rudy demand of Michael. Soon relations began to drift and then Michael came to work less and less. Soon he stayed away altogether.

In the context of relatedness, Michael’s request is a ‘demand that “working for” be acknowledged and that the “boss” affirms the caring or “looking after” that comes with authority’ (Austin-Broos 2006:6). No such commitment presides over relations of ‘work’ in the context of market society. The social relations and obligations extend no further beyond the transaction of provision of labour for monetary compensation.

Within the kin-economy ‘working for’, that is the practice related to the servicing of kinship through the redistribution of cash and commodities (Austin-Broos 2003), though ‘consistent with a past sociality’ does not have the capacity to create an alternative economy to match the market because of lack of resources. Nor can it in the context of the dominant neo-liberal order generate social ‘prestige’ (Austin-Broos 2006:3). It is
becoming increasingly difficult to sustain kin-based socialities ‘either in engagement with or attempted isolation from market society’ (Austin-Broos 2003b:7) because of the ubiquitous nature of neo-liberal ideology. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2001:14) have observed neo-liberalism in its ideology and practice, aims to ‘intensify the abstractions inherent in capitalism itself: to separate labour power from its human context, to replace society with the market, to build a universe out of aggregated transactions’. Along with the emergence of ‘consumerism’ as the pre-eminent social act for the ‘fabrication of self and society, culture and identity’(Comaroff and Comaroff 2001:9) came a change to the status of work, not least of which was directly related to ‘individuals’ being measured by their ability to transact and consume. Living ‘relatedness’ is largely seen to curtail greater participation in full-time employment and practical training regimes, that lead to work placements, the lifestyle objectives so fundamental to the neo-liberal state. ‘Work’, to the degree that neo-liberal state subjects are expected to participate, and career narratives evoking the individualised sense of self and social milieu animated by engagement in ‘work’, comes to represent a domain full of conflicts. Neo-liberal discourse defines a new structure of social interests, which in turn becomes a moralising instrument used to discredit the identity-forming qualities inherent in the Indigenous kin-economy, therefore delegitimising the preference shown by many Indigenous people towards activities that detract from neo-liberal ends.

For the production and reproduction of valued and culturally specific Indigenous notions of person, the social and institutional structures of neo-liberalism afford little room. The spheres within which Indigenous Australians are able to co-ordinate personal goals of maintaining and pursuing kinship have been heavily intruded by the dominance of neo-liberalism that holds no value in the kinds of difference that kin economies entail. What we see in the Indigenous social malaise is a reflection of the short-circuiting that neo-
liberalism causes in the construction, maintenance and adaptation of the Indigenous subject. This is not to argue that Indigenous people are incapable of, or do not desire, change. Rather, it is a case of the Indigenous self being forced violently and suddenly into the particular ways in which the political economy of neo-liberalism shapes and produces subjects of the state. For Indigenous Australians the moral economy that comes with neo-liberalism is an imposition that requires massive change to how they think about themselves and relate to each other. The individualisation of people and the consumption ethic so central to neo-liberal economic development policies are destructive of Indigenous moral economies, yet the insistence on incorporating Indigenous Australians into the market economy through an emphasis on individuation and consumption means simultaneously a dismantling and devaluation of Indigenous notions of personhood without addressing the traumas of such change. A remaking of the Indigenous subject is central to neo-liberal economic practice and governance, even at the cost of Indigenous sense of well-being, both collectively and individually.

The State’s Domain

With the shift in subjects of the state from citizens to ‘consumers’ the presence of the state in the daily lives of Indigenous peoples has increased. The previous contract between citizen and state rested on the premise that ‘submission to state power was to be legitimized by its endorsement of an insurance policy against individual mischance and calamity’ (Bauman 2004:51). The emphasis now on individualised efforts to engage in the market-based economy has seen the state recast its mode of governing with notions of ‘mutual obligation’ that sees individuals burdened with the moral imperative of ‘responsibility’ for not only themselves, but also their immediates. Receipt of material and social benefit occurs with the appropriate participation in market society: there is no
guarantee for those ‘failing’ in their responsibilities at any level of social welfare, let alone social well-being.

One instance of ‘Indigenous failure’ can be seen in the Federal Government intervention that took place in the Northern Territory in June 2007. After the release of the *Little Children are Sacred* Report that documented allegations of widespread child sexual abuse occurring in Indigenous communities, the then Prime Minister John Howard and his Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, declared a state of emergency. Through the mobilisation of police and army units, the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) was to implement fundamental changes to the operation of Indigenous communities. Of particular interest to my discussion was the decision to quarantine welfare payments. This measure was an effort to force individuals to more appropriately and responsibly spend their money. Government transfers such as family assistance and income support were linked to compulsory school attendance. The reform measures were legitimated on the basis that quarantining would curtail the monies flowing towards the abuse of substances and ensure that child welfare money was spent on precisely that - a child’s welfare. But it also made apparent the way in which the state can directly influence patterns of spending, and ultimately modes of consumption, and place limits on where monies can be spent, which has direct implications for the ‘high levels of mobility that characterise the rhythms of daily life ... as people travel continually to attend to kin, ceremony and country’ (Hinkson 2007:5). The impositions that welfare quarantining place on the kin-economy will most likely not curtail the pursuit and maintenance of the kin-economy, but it will make it more difficult to privilege this mode of economy. It will place pressure on the historically resilient kin networks that distil Indigenous notions of personhood, in the hope of producing some form of breach. In this way we see that the ‘soft knife of state policy’ (Das and Kleinman 2001:10) leaves scars, that I argue are
intended. Along with greater state presence through quarantining of welfare, also comes an increase in the state’s capacity to effect Indigenous psychological disposition directly. The restrictions to where people spend money may potentially undermine Indigenous ontology as expressed through kin based practices because it interferes with Indigenous people’s ability to practice relatedness. As discussed above the practice of relatedness is central to Indigenous ontology. The ways in which Indigenous people imagine themselves in the world, how they order everyday life, is in reference to kin. Constraints placed on the practice of kinship contribute to Indigenous social malaise. With the potential to undermine the foundations of Indigenous senses of self, state practices can and do contribute to emerging senses of disorientation within Indigenous society as to where one’s place in the world is.

The punitive nature of the NTER welfare reforms was presented as legitimate precisely because of the shift in how the neo-liberal state perceives its duty to citizens, and vice-versa. The NTER reforms are expected to bring the Indigenous domestic sphere more in line with patterns of consumption and expectations of responsible fiscal management promoted by market economy logic. Though neo-liberal economic reform in general promotes less interference in the context of free trade, the quarantining of welfare in the NTER is one example of how the presence of state becomes more deeply entangled in the daily lives of people who are not seen as socially equipped to participate. A focus on welfare reform and the link to child sexual abuse obscured the need to attend to issues of social change that produce environments in which violence and substance abuse become major indices of social suffering. Such oversight cannot include in its analysis of decline in socio-cultural conditions the role that state policies play in producing social suffering. For all the promises of freedom and choice that neo-liberalism makes, Indigenous people are increasingly finding that their range of acceptable cultural difference is being
minimised in order to fashion the difference to fit the scope of the neo-liberal. In her recent discussion on Indigenous social suffering, Macdonald (2010) argues that it is only through historicizing Indigenous experience that one can begin to understand the ways in which the state can produce social suffering. In recent years the relationship with the state has become more stifling to Indigenous socio-cultural reproduction, even though progressive policies sought to bring about significant advances in the marginal position of Indigenous Australians. With the shift in the modern colonial project being concerned with the mind, Indigenous Australians have come under intense pressure. Though previous colonizing process have always made their presence felt, Macdonald (2010) argues that Wiradjuri people were able to transform their colonially appointed status in through terms that contained understanding of themselves as Wiradjuri persons. The most recent version of the colonial project has seen Indigenous Australians ‘experiencing the worst form of social and cultural destruction’(2010:49) because it seeks to colonize their personhood. Such a project requires a level of ontological violence that Indigenous Australians have previously not been subject to.

In focusing on the current social malaise found in many Indigenous communities, I do not wish to contribute further to pathologising discourses, but rather to recognise that, as an historically and socially constructed phenomena, the occurrence of malaise corresponds to certain socio-political developments. I argue that neo-liberalism has played a major role in exacerbating the climate of distress found, most critically in the ways in which it intrudes on Indigenous notions of personhood. The social malaise understood as an expression of the disjunctures and tensions occurring at the interface of Indigenous and non-indigenous moral orders can be taken as a concrete ethnographic example of how many Indigenous Australians are responding to and experiencing the demands of modern neo-liberal subjectivity.
A better understanding of social malaise needs to take into account the broader social, economic, and political structures within which Indigenous Australians carry out their lives. Whilst it would be inaccurate to assume that major forms of social malaise exist in every Indigenous community, and each has its own history of struggle, the fact that the occurrence of malaise is not geographically specific, but can be found in remote, rural, and urban Indigenous communities points to the need to consider the broader structural contributions to community climates. Hale (2005) has described the way in which neo-liberalism as an overall socio-political strategy of governance now has implications well beyond the economic arena. In particular he argues that the progressive measures found in neo-liberal governance, for example, the recognition of cultural rights, produce ‘unexpected effects’ (2005:1) when executed with the economic policies of neo-liberalism. He highlights unanticipated effects of neo-liberal socio-economic policies seen through the limitations placed on cultural difference: a ‘deepened state capacity to shape and neutralize political opposition’ as well as intrude on people’s private lives, and also a remaking of racial hierarchies’ (2005:1). As Rose (1993:285) has observed, neo-liberal governance ‘does not seek to govern through ‘society’, but through the regulated choices of individual citizens’, the imperative to ‘choose’ correctly often sees Indigenous cultural differences being at odds with the ideal neo-liberal citizen, whose choices align with the interests of state projects. Governance imposed by rationalities of competition, accountability and consumer demand situated within the capitalist market affords little room to personal influences that may result in alternative prioritising of the types of activities, especially those of economic importance, that interfere with creating consumers out of citizens. The regulation of individual choice directly impact, usually in a detrimental way, on Indigenous Australian’s day to day lives, and, I argue, are largely
responsible for the social malaise that currently characterises many Indigenous lives throughout Australia.

I have argued that the neo-liberal political economy to which the Australian nation state subscribes is producing a politics of moral order that Indigenous Australians are struggling to negotiate. Being part of a wider market economy means regular, if not daily, conflict between kin-based and market based logics shaping Indigenous lives. A major oversight in government attempts to produce better integration into the market economy and establishing social equity has been that ‘Indigeneity’ has been understood as a politics of choice and identity, a status assumed, rather than a process of historical, cultural, and social continuity. This ‘optional status’ may be thought to be liberating in that it is about free choice and reflects the tolerance of the modern Australian nation-state, but if considered within the framework of a politics of moral order being played out in a neo-liberal climate this ‘optional status’ becomes more insidious; packaged like a commodity to be consumed, not fundamentally part of the individual. Further still, it presents Indigenous social malaise as somehow avoidable, if only the ‘right choices’ of life style were made

The manner in which neo-liberalism is exercised as a moralising instrument is damaging to, for want of a better expression, any Indigenous domain. Through an understanding of Indigenous notions of personhood it becomes clear that values and meanings central to Indigenous people’s lives often fall outside the province of state values. The issue is not whether Indigenous peoples are consumers: they, like every other Australian citizen are, but not in the ‘right’ ways. A personhood based exclusively on acquisition and consumption is difficult to reconcile with a moral economy based on demand-sharing and kinship. The limitation inherent in neo-liberal political ideology means that for Indigenous
people the cultural differences that detract from state expectations of ‘citizen as consumer’ are regarded as differences to be neutralised, or, failing that, demonized. Though consumers, Indigenous people pursue an identity that involves cultural differences that the state cannot, or will not, accommodate, and therefore must contain and delegitimize. In his overview of Indigenous societies’ shifts from hunter-gathering to engagement in a market economy, Peterson (2005) makes the point that the state objective to achieve statistical equality regularly fails to incorporate cultural considerations into economic activity. Economic development is not regarded as having much relevance to or impact on the cultural arena. For the market economy to usurp the kin economy, there have to be ‘real and profound material consequences’ not to engage with it (Peterson 2005:15). To non-Indigenous people this would usually refer to a decline in one’s material base. For Indigenous peoples, who by and large already occupy Australia’s margins, such an impact has less significance than the cultural pursuit of relatedness. It is this relatedness which has provided their safety nets in the past, and the state is not offering a valued or attractive alternative.
4 Neo-liberalism Through the Looking Glass: A Conclusion.

If the social malaise found in many Aboriginal communities is to be understood beyond the neo-liberal discourse of Indigenous pathology then it is important that Australian anthropology broadens its topics of consideration. Morris (2003) has made the point that the discipline of anthropology in Australia suffers from a “poverty of anthropological ... framework” in producing accounts of contemporary Aboriginal experiences of the impact that social and historical change brings. He also makes the point that Australian anthropological research is also often limited, confining itself to traditional Aboriginal communities usually found in the northern and central regions of Australia. In addressing Cowlishaw’s concerns of whether Australian anthropology had anything relevant to say about the “alleged crisis in Aboriginal society today” I want to press the points made by Morris about the paucity of anthropological frameworks, as well as the Aboriginal communities chosen for study sites.

In researching this paper it soon became clear that literature concerned with political economy and its relevance to anthropological endeavours, did not feature much in the Australian context. This shortage of materials is not surprising in view of the well established tendency to place considerations of matters relating to Indigenous Australians ‘in an all things cultural corral’, with economic concerns being somehow acultural and thus on the outer. In his discussion of alternative modernities, Knauft (2002) highlights the necessity to consider how the contemporary experience of non-western peoples is intertwined with global economic processes, and how specifically local practices and understandings of the global forces shape peoples’ lived experiences. Political economy in anthropology has the capacity to highlight the ways in which larger, seemingly impersonal trends in structural histories of the dominant
West play out at the local level, often producing quite different responses in the non-Western societies being encompassed.

Political economy as a framework is ‘good to think’. It provides an insight into what Knauft (2002) has called alternative modernities, those contemporary experiences that do not align strictly to dominant western capitalist discourses. In a similar way it also contributes to dismantling notions of Indigenous incapacity to cope with the expression of modernity they are dealing with. It creates a discursive space to critique the conundrum of why, in spite of the array of government policy efforts in Aboriginal affairs, social malaise has fermented, with little to show in improved social equality and well-being. I have represented neo-liberal political economy as a moral order, and as such, this construction is helpful in accounting for the seemingly puzzling persistence of socio-economic marginality among many Indigenous Australians who have been the subjects of supposedly progressive policies of self-determination and self-management since the 1970s. The gap between expectations fuelled by capitalist imaginaries and the reality experienced by Indigenous Australians has been entrenched one might think since colonisation started. It is only in the intense pressure of neo-liberal policy orientations that it has come to have such an intrusive impact on Aboriginal selves.

Indigenous social malaise can be read, in part, as a consequence of the rigidity in modes of engagement that the neo-liberal order will tolerate. For its part, anthropological understanding of difference developed within a political economy approach can provide interpretations of the malaise extending beyond pathologising discourses of Indigenous incapacity. It is thus able to appreciate the real and daily struggles that Indigenous cultural difference produces, and can demonstrate that analysis of the malaise within a political economy approach shows how, albeit in varying degrees, the global economy
impacts on individual lives. It is not coincidental that the emergence of severe Indigenous social malaise has accompanied the rise of neo-liberal forms of governance. Neo-liberal governance promotes engagement with the market economy with very little consideration of the compromises being asked of Indigenous persons in relationship to each other, and with little insight into the conditions of inequality which pre-existed it. These combined factors have produced a crisis of self and relatedness evident not only in Australia, but also in other parts of the Indigenous world (Samson 2004 cf. Macdonald 2010).

Looking towards legacies of the past does not alone explain the occurrence of social malaise in Aboriginal Australia with all its variations in geographical locations and contact histories. What Aboriginal communities have in common, despite varying histories, is the way they are inserted in a political economy in which people are now regarded as consumers. Important in this consideration is the fact that a large proportion of Aboriginal people are recipients of some kind of government transfer - whether it be payments in Abstudy, unemployment benefit, parental or aged benefits. As such they are consumers within a segment of the economy that comes under control of government.

What becomes increasingly clear is that analysis of contemporary Indigenous Australia cannot be devoid of economic considerations, especially if the ubiquitous nature of neo-liberal ideology is acknowledged. Social practice cannot be understood outside of the economic possibilities and constraints that people are confronted with. Indigenous people are confronted with the neo-liberal order in ways that strike at the heart of the Indigenous sense of self and self as social. Modern day Australia requires that Indigenous people be conversant with the market economy, the rationalities of
competition, consumptions and consumer demand. Regardless of whether one lives remote, rural or urban, the state emphasis is on these market informed rationalities. The application of political economy as framework for anthropological analysis provides a way to backdrop experiences in the lived present, as varied as they may be, and to contextualise issues historically.

Ferguson (2002:138) has referred to the intensification of the phenomenon of “have nots” as ‘the social experience of decline’ that occurs when the offers of participation in the projects of modernity are retracted or no longer provide a space for inclusion. Drawing from Ferguson’s (2002:137) Lewis Carroll inspired lens, I present this reading of Indigenous Australians’ social malaise as neo-liberalism through the looking glass, whereby the key recommendations put forth by enthusiasts of neo-liberal ideology rarely produce the intended social and economic outcomes, and mostly exacerbate the marginal position occupied by Indigenous Australians. For many Indigenous Australians the tensions caused by the discord of dominant neo-liberal political economy provide little room for kin-based orientations and are now present in day to day life. They are likely to remain a constant; a feature in the unenviable Aboriginal responsibility to negotiate between destructively competing moral orders.

As a research topic “Indigenous social malaise” was never going to suffer from a lack of reading material. However what soon became clear was that much of the work done was situated in remote and rural areas, often relying on interpretations that rested on cultural relativity to explain away the socio-economic conditions as wanting, only when glimpsed through the eyes of the non-Indigenous beholder. Through a juxtapositioning of the competing logics of the kin-economy and the market economy, I have conveyed the real stresses and cultural confrontations that Indigenous people encounter on a daily
basis, and what occurs when these logics fail to align. Successful Indigenous participation in the mainstream economy is heavily focused on the production and appropriate consumption procedures of the market economy, almost to the exclusion of the social meanings of those practices. This focus elides the compromises being made by Indigenous participation, and cannot account for the rise in feelings of dispirited and unmotivated participation. The fulfilment of kin-based obligations within the Indigenous domain becomes strained and more difficult under neo-liberalism. A sense of disorientation begins to emerge within Indigenous understandings of the moral person as the loyalties of individuals become ambivalent, mixed, and often incompatible, resulting in confusion, conflict, anger and thus social malaise.

In anticipation of questions concerning the efficacy of using a neo-liberal framework in an anthropological analysis I recognise that “neo-liberalism” became a buzz-word for economic prosperity or its ills, depending on which side of the fence one sat, throughout the 1990s and the 2000s. The literature it has promoted is voluminous. Considering the political economy of neo-liberalism and the manner in which it intersects with Indigenous peoples lives, it becomes apparent that policies made under this banner intrude significantly on Indigenous senses of being. Stanner (2009:148) observed that Indigenous sociality, being “tied to others by a dozen ties which are his life’ cannot fit easily in the abstracted ‘individual’ that this orientation allows for. I would add to this comment that the progression of individual to consumer that has taken place in the neo-liberal era has seen major limitations to the ways in which people may choose to engage in matters of state that have social and economic significance to their own lives. As a political ideology that has directed so much government policy, neo-liberalism must become a focus for Australian anthropology if the repeated failures to establish Indigenous social equity in times of such prosperity are to be understood.
beyond issues of poverty and pathology alone. What do Indigenous people themselves experience as a life of ‘quality’? To analyse Indigenous social malaise as being something more than simply a product of endemic poverty requires a broader consideration of the discursive processes through which the depressed socio-economic conditions become accepted as a “normal” part of Australian society. The relative paucity of ethnographic studies done on urban Indigenous communities suggests that even as an academic discipline, Australian anthropology has not been immune to the effects of the ‘normalising’ of depressed socio-economic conditions within Indigenous Australia that neo-liberal discourse produces.

Concerns of political economy and its relevance to anthropological enquiry, especially with regards to the construction of contemporary anthropological subjects with differentiated experiences of ‘modernity’ (usually constructed as ‘The Other’) have not been absent from anthropological discourses altogether. In his overview of the development of anthropological political economy Roseberry (1988:169) succinctly argues why considerations of this nature are fundamental to anthropological enquiry, with its strength lying in the ‘placement of anthropological subjects within larger historical, political, and economic movements [with] attempt[s] to understand the impact of structures of power upon them’. In the Australian context Indigenous peoples have been subordinated through regimes of imperial colonialism and post-colonial states. Neither hegemonies have gone uncontested or could be regarded as having extensive determinative success in remaking Indigenous people into Western capitalist participants, yet the resistance to and evasion from the states reconstitutive apparatus needs to be understood within the confines that dominant western capitalist states impose on those it incorporates. The ability to resist hegemonic forces can easily slip into romanticised perceptions of cultural freedoms being unhampered by structural
powers. As Knauf, drawing on Marx observes, ‘people make their own modernity, but not under conditions of their own choosing’ (2002b:132). It is the tensions that become apparent at the intersection of global structures and local socio-cultural sensibilities that ‘defines anthropological political economy, its preoccupations, projects, and promise’ (Roseberry 1988:174).

With a few exceptions (see Austin-Broos 2009, Macdonald 2008, Peterson 2005), political economy has not been a focus in recent years for Australianists in the same way that other anthropologists working in different regions around the world have began to draw it into view. Neglecting political economy as an area for anthropological enquiry seems positively absurd in light of the problems of articulation that many Indigenous peoples experience between the political economy trajectories of neoliberalism and their own cultural sensibilities, and the central place that these problems hold in the daily rhythms of Indigenous lives, especially in producing and maintaining an extensive social malaise. To make any anthropological analysis relevant to the understanding of why the well-being of Indigenous Australians has been so compromised consideration must be given to how the structural forces of political economy play out within a local context. Equally pertinent is an appreciation of dominant political economy, as an all pervasive uncompromising moral order, potentially limiting Indigenous Australians’ capacity to produce and maintain culturally meaningful relationships and identities.

In part the social malaise now being experienced by Indigenous people and witnessed by the rest of Australia has become, at least to some degree, accepted as the human collateral damage that the neoliberal order has inflicted within the nation’s borders (cf. Bauman 2004). One lesson, at least, can be taken from the past thirty years of
Indigenous affairs. That is, how better to incorporate Indigenous Australians within the Australian nation state beyond tokenistic symbolic cultural inclusion, and occupancy on its margins. Surely, upon reflection it becomes clear that the liberal frameworks brought to bear on the ways in which policy development has attempt to bring about socio-economic equity has proven to be inadequate in the ways it has been applied. The reservations expressed in this thesis about the compatibility of liberal forms of egalitarianism is not that it is always and forever a philosophy that is at odds with Indigenous aspirations, but rather that the specific forms now being produced through neo-liberalism- an ideology that is primarily concerned with the maximisation of profit, and with social concerns merely as a positive by-product of the good form in ‘free-market’ models, are a major contributing factor in the malaise currently gripping many communities and hampering the social reproduction of flourishing, robust communities.
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