

Culture Crisis
ANTHROPOLOGY AND POLITICS
IN ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA

Edited by Jon Altman
and Melinda Hinkson

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- of assimilation? Changing perspectives on immigration and its sequel in France, Germany, and the United States, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 24(4): 531–48.
- 5 Diane Barwick wrote of economic absorption without assimilation in Melbourne during the 1950s. She was using assimilation in the capital A sense. I am not suggesting that in achieving social indicator parity, Aboriginal people's culture will be identical with non-Aboriginal people, nor that they will lose their identity as Aboriginal people, but only that some change to values, beliefs and practices is entailed. See D. Barwick (1962) Economic absorption without assimilation, *Oceania*, 33(1): 18–23.
- 6 K. Marx (1904) *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, International Library, New York; M. Weber (1920/1930) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, George Allen & Unwin, London; G. Simmel (1907/1978) *The Philosophy of Money*, Tavistock, London; E. Banfield (1958) *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois; M. Sahlin (1976) *Culture and Practical Reason*, Chicago University Press, Chicago; L. Harrison (1985) *Underdevelopment is a State of Mind: The Latin American Case*, University Press of America, Cambridge, MA; see also L. Harrison and S. Huntington (eds) (2000) *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, Basic Books, New York.
- 7 This position is rarely thought through but some people maintain the position by distinguishing between the really important deep culture which is left untouched, and the negative cultural aspects which have resulted from colonisation and subsequent policy, and are the focus of modification. Underlying this appears to be the fear of removing difference.
- 8 R. Williams (1983) *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Fontana, London.
- 9 A. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn (1952) *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, Peabody Museum, Cambridge, MA.
- 10 See D. Martin (1995) *Money, business and culture: Issues for Aboriginal economic policy*, CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 101, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra, and N. Peterson (1999) Hunter-gatherers in first world nation states: bringing anthropology home, *Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology*, 23(4): 847–61; for a discussion of what I have called the Indigenous domestic moral economy see N. Peterson and J. Taylor (2003) The modernising of the indigenous domestic moral economy: Kinship, accumulation and household composition, *Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 4(1&2): 105–22.
- 11 E. P. Thompson (1963) *The Making of the English Working Class*, Gollancz, London; S. Pollard (1965) *The Genesis of Modern Management: A Study of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain*, Edward Arnold, London.
- 12 Y. Musharbash (2008) *Yuendumu Everyday: Contemporary Life in Remote Aboriginal Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.
- 13 D. Austin-Broos (2006) 'Working for' and 'working' among the western Arrernte in central Australia, *Oceania*, 76(1):1–15.
- 14 F. Myers (1986) *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Selves: Sentiment, Place and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*, Smithsonian Press, Washington.
- 15 This comes on top of a deeply rooted and longstanding view stemming from ideas of cultural relativism, held by many anthropologists, that the discipline has no legitimate role in effecting change in people's lives.
- 16 P. Sutton (2009) *The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the End of the Liberal Mission: Selected Writings*, Black Inc, Melbourne.
- 17 Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse (2007) *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle, 'Little Children are Sacred'*, Northern Territory Government, Darwin.

14

What future for remote Indigenous Australia? Economic hybridity and the neoliberal turn

Jon Altman

I want to begin with three vignettes from recent work with Aboriginal people that move from the corridors of power in Parliament House, Canberra, to remote Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.

Vignette 1: On 8 September 2009 I was in a committee room in Parliament House in Canberra accompanying a delegation of Yolngu and Binjini from western and eastern Arnhem Land. They were passionately pleading with development bureaucrats and ministerial advisers for policies that were more supportive of homelands and outstations, and in particular for the reinstatement of a community development program

called the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP). They were informed by concerned-looking, but adamant, bureaucrats that they shared the same vision to Close the Gap, but that changes to CDEP were non-negotiable, CDEP 'reform' (code for abolition) was now government policy that bureaucrats could only implement, not influence. The bureaucrats articulated a view that those on CDEP would eventually be able to find proper jobs, perhaps at the Alcan mine in Gove. Perhaps people would need to move away from their country to find mainstream employment. The bureaucrats were reminded by Yolngu that they opposed the mine on their land forty years ago and that they would never work for the mining company. Officials were repeatedly asked why Yolngu and Biniinj were being moved from working on CDEP to passive welfare, a question that was never answered. The meeting ended with official commitment to review employment possibilities in remote Arnhem Land.

Vignette 2: Three weeks later, on 30 September, I was in eastern Arnhem Land. At a moving 'welcome to country' ceremony, a theatrical postcolonial event, on Nhulun, the sacred hill in the centre of the mining town of Nhulunbuy, a senior Rirrainguu man told us how his father the late Roy Marika had fought Nabalco (now Alcan) and the Commonwealth to stop mining on his traditional lands. Pointing to massive retention ponds clearly visible from the top of the hill and the expansive bauxite processing facility and port, he explained that the transformations that mining had caused to the landscape were the equivalent of scarring his body – he demonstrated this by running his fingers across his chest. He was the new head of Dhimurru Aboriginal Corporation, a community-based natural and cultural resource management agency established by the Yolngu to ameliorate environmental impacts in the Gove region. He explained that he could never work for the mining company that violated his land in direct transgression of his father's wishes, but the company did provide some funding to Dhimurru for its environmental work.

Vignette 3: A few days earlier, on 24 September, I had been in western Arnhem Land attending the celebratory declaration of the Warddeken Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) on the Arnhem Land escarpment. A

senior landowner, describing himself as an Aboriginal fire ecologist, explained what emptying the landscape of people had meant in the contemporary period – introduced feral animals and unmanaged wildfires had major destructive impacts on rock art sites and sacred billabongs, on waterways and on the viability of endemic species. The land had been 'orphaned' and had suffered, but now it was being reoccupied. The land needs its people and the declaration of the IPA, with state support from the Commonwealth environment department, was seen as an opportunity to bring back the next generation onto country, to learn about country and species management from the old people 'before it was too late'. He was adamant that people needed to be brought in to manage the country (to 'orbit in' not 'orbit out') and that Biniinj and Balanda, Indigenous and western scientists had to work together, collaboratively on the challenge of managing the 13 000 square kilometres of Warddeken IPA, an area larger than some small countries like Lebanon or Jamaica, but with a population of only several hundred people.

These three vignettes encapsulate much of what I want to cover in this essay; they demonstrate three forms of developmental interaction. The first represents a humiliating rebuff by influential agents of the state suggesting to Yolngu and Biniinj that they need to get proper jobs, including at mines that they opposed, that a community development and employment program was to be dismantled to force people to take such real jobs. The second provides a brief historical and cultural context for state and Yolngu 'crossed purposes' in relation to such mainstream employment; and the third provides a segue to more productive and hybrid contemporary state–Biniinj relations supported by more sympathetic elements of what Pierre Bourdieu has termed the 'bureaucratic field' that have advocated for Aboriginal management of regions of high biodiversity value. The vignettes demonstrate diversity in the state project of improvement for remote living Aboriginal people ranging from an inability or unwillingness to respond to Aboriginal aspirations and desires in the economic realm and an obstinate intent to reshape them to a more sympathetic response that values Aboriginal contributions and ways of being.

I have been working in anthropology and Aboriginal economic development for a long time, over thirty years, both in Canberra and the bush. I am no novice, but I found the encounter at Parliament House deeply disturbing, perhaps because I had friends on both sides of the table and I was clearly aligned with one side. Equally disturbing was the juxtaposition between power relations in Canberra in contrast to the remote bush. Also, I was disappointed, since early 2008 and the National Apology to the Stolen Generations I had expected a shift in relations between Aboriginal people and the state that has not been forthcoming.

I should have known better. After the National Apology a new policy framework for Aboriginal economic development has been rapidly deployed by the Australian state. The grand narrative is to Close the Gap and the policy mechanism is a series of National Partnership Agreements bundled into the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (Closing the Gap) that I refer to here as NIRA. NIRA was unanimously endorsed, with the elixir of billions of dollars from the Commonwealth, by the Council of Australian Governments in July 2009.

NIRA constitutes an extremely complex, managerial and technical approach to addressing Aboriginal disadvantage that is probably for the first time ever unambiguously based on articulated neoliberal principles. It is a state project that envisages an economic future for Aboriginal people as part of the Australian mainstream – the latest discursive and policy assault of the settler colonial society on diversity and difference that remain enduring features of Aboriginal societies in remote Australia. NIRA represents a fundamental redeployment of state power and unprecedented financial commitments to meet state-specified mainstreaming ends. Most of its focus is on remote Australia where only 2.5 per cent of the Aboriginal population lives. It is envisaged that remote living Aboriginal people will engage in the so-called real economy like other Australians, with progress in closing the development gap to be measured by social indicators of standard education and employment outcomes.

In this essay I want to challenge this increasingly dominant discursive framing of development policy, arguing for a fundamentally different

approach that can encompass a wider set of economic forms and intercultural values. For nearly a decade now, since 2001, I have termed this alternative 'the hybrid economy'; it is a framework that adds the customary sector, where it exists and persists, to the standard two-sector economic model – and so properly empirically grounds and complexities the nature of Aboriginal economies in remote Australia beyond the usual market and state monetised duality. I demonstrate the utility of this framing with reference to programs to environmentally manage Aboriginal-owned land and offer the model as a possible mechanism for remote living Aboriginal people to operationalise to advocate for a more sympathetic response from the Australian state that will see value in Aboriginal contributions and ways of being.

LIVING REMOTELY AND THE STATE PROJECT OF IMPROVEMENT

Since the 1970s, land rights and native title laws have seen considerable parts of remote Australia returned to Aboriginal people. Today, over 20 per cent of the Australian continent is Aboriginal owned. Official statistics indicate that about 100 000 Aboriginal people live in just over 1000 Aboriginal communities on this land, with most having a population of less than 100 each. Both Aboriginal land ownership and discrete Aboriginal communities are shown in figure 14.1 overleaf, although the dots for communities are just illustrative and no distinction is made here between forms of Aboriginal tenure. The larger discrete 'Aboriginal' communities in fact have mixed populations, predominantly Aboriginal, while the smaller communities, often called homelands or outstations, have populations that are almost always Aboriginal only.

While many Aboriginal traditional owners have been able to successfully reclaim their ancestral land, as the map shows ownership remains heavily skewed in favour of remote Australia and away from densely settled Australia where land is more commercially productive, and where

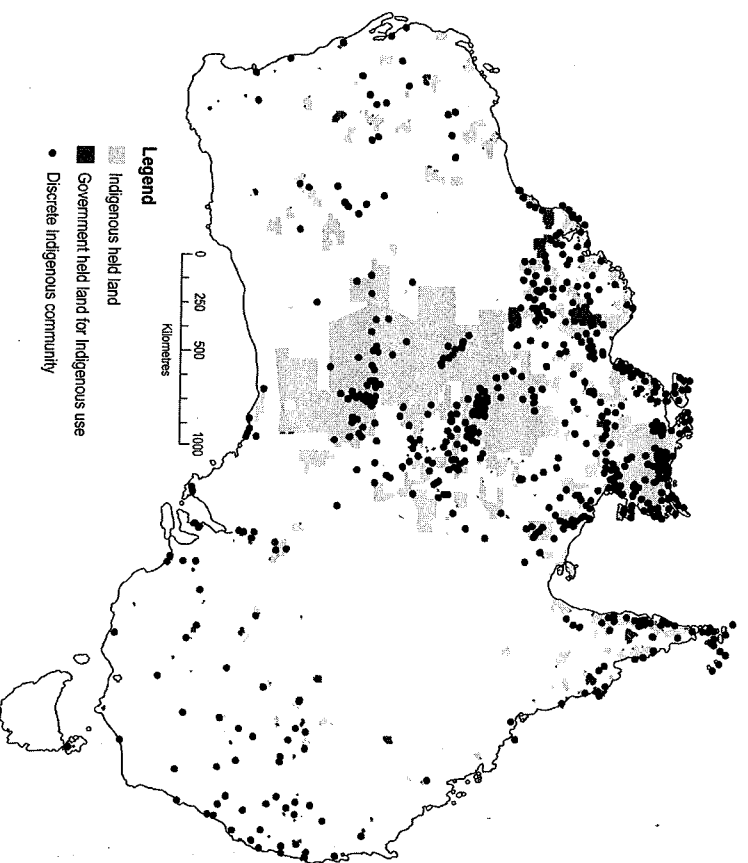


FIGURE 14.1 Discrete indigenous communities and Indigenous-owned land

Aboriginal people have been more thoroughly dispossessed. However, even where Aboriginal people have seen property rights in land reinstated, these rights have been highly variable. In the Northern Territory most land is held under inalienable freehold title and traditional owners enjoy exclusive possession to the extent that any commercial development on their land requires their free prior informed consent. In other places forms of title, even if an exclusive native title determination, do not have such consent provisions. And while under native title law traditional owners have guaranteed rights to resources for customary (domestic) purposes; property rights in commercially valuable resources, like minerals and water, have not been legally recognised. This partially explains disappointing and highly variable development outcomes: the colonisation process mainly left land of low commercial value available for claim and excluded valuable resources from Aboriginal ownership, an issue that is

currently under challenge in Cape York with debate over the Queensland state's Wild Rivers law.

Everywhere in Australia Aboriginal claimants have to participate in a western legal process to get their land back. This requires institutional codification of 'traditions and customs', a process that Patrick Wolfe has evocatively termed 'repressive authenticity'.³ For example, section 3 of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* requires that Aborigines demonstrate that they are a local descent group with primary spiritual responsibility for sacred sites, entitled 'as a right to forage over the land claimed'. And section 223 of the *Native Title Act 1993* requires claimants to demonstrate continuity of rights and interests under traditional laws acknowledged and traditional customs observed, and the maintenance of connection with lands and waters since colonisation. Through these requirements Indigenous Australians have become trapped in a western legal definition of authenticity to gain formal title to their ancestral lands. When claims or determinations succeed, sometimes after years of legal contestation, it is hardly surprising that people want to live on country and engage, even if only sporadically, in customary economic activity in its own right (a basis for claim) or interlinked with other market or state-supported activity like natural and cultural resource management. Forensic anthropology has played a central role in the legal processes that have seen land returned to Aboriginal owners.

Remote communities (as distributed in the map in figure 14.1) are non-mainstream communities; they are invariably postcolonial constructs resulting from fraught historical processes of invasion, land alienation, warfare and colonial incarceration. And yet an emerging and dominant discourse seeks to judge the viability of these remote communities according to some cost/benefit or input/output or export/import or public/private calculus, using a clinical discourse of viability that is rarely applied to 'pioneering' non-Indigenous communities, large or small, in remote Australia. And while we see ongoing public debates about economic viability and community size, there is no evidence that larger places (be they urban centres, Australian government 'priority communities' or Territory Growth

Towns – as if names generate growth) provide better prospects than those evident at the 1000 smaller places, except in the imagination of politicians and policy-makers and advocates for normalisation. In any case, as I have argued elsewhere, these are false debates because the larger and smaller places are usually socially interconnected; people move between them.⁴

Some of the recent focus on urbanisation might just be the state, as James Scott might say, 'seeing like a state'.⁵ After all, good state making requires the civilisation of space and demography; the state project is to homogenise communities and discourage small dispersed settlements and mobile populations that are hard and expensive to govern. Such small dispersed communities do provide opportunity for alternative lifeworlds and livelihoods. But the state looks to eliminate non-state spaces and to meet the labour and resource needs of mature capitalism, especially in labour-power poor and mining-dependent situations as in Australia. At the same time, those residing in the remotest homelands and outstations have become expert in state evasion; they have, to again borrow from Scott, learnt 'the art of not being governed'.⁶ So part of the tension between the Australian state and small dispersed populations can be understood in such terms.

There is, however, something far more insidious and ideological happening and this at a time when a central plank of policy-making espouses the value of evidence-based policy-making, free of ideology. There is, in fact, no evidence of such an approach. Instead, 'authoritarian moralism', to use Loïc Wacquant's term,⁷ has gained momentum in the twenty-first century to become a core element in the working of the Australian state that has increasingly embraced neoliberal principles.

I cannot go into great detail here about the complex lineage of this fundamental shift in policy and practice; it is born of many things. For me, four interlinked explainers stand out.

The first is the discourse of policy failure, espoused by the mainstream media and the Howard government for over a decade, linking the crisis of Indigenous violence to economic marginalisation.⁸ I am certainly not averse to seeing melancholia and a hopeless politics associated with

intergenerational marginalisation and neglect.⁹ But I do note that this marginalisation has been aided, not abated, by long-term state neglect by all governments, especially during a decade-long period of unprecedented national economic growth.

The second is an emerging view that aspects of Aboriginal culture, classical and contemporary, have mixed badly with this neglect and have generated over many years a destructive cocktail in some regional circumstances, now highlighted by Noel Pearson¹⁰ and Peter Sutton¹¹ especially with reference to Cape York, as a product of the 'permissive' liberal consensus. Pearson in particular has focused on the destructive impact of 'passive welfare' that is now part of the policy lexicon. I have no doubt that the Australian state has become technically expert in delivering welfare support to individuals, thus rendering them dependent, while being far less adept at delivering public services and development assistance to remote communities on an equitable needs basis. This problem is linked to the nature of Australian fiscal federalism and presumably NIRA aims to fix this.

The third is the excessive influence of neoconservative thinkers like Helen Hughes¹² (sponsored by the Centre for Independent Studies 'think tank') importing American 'punishing the poor',¹³ and in Australia's case 'the different', neopaternalistic welfare policy approaches, and ascribing to principles that only valorise the free market, private property and entrepreneurship. Her links with the most senior Commonwealth bureaucrat administering Indigenous affairs were exposed in an article in *The Age* in the week before the 2007 federal election.¹⁴

The fourth is a pervasive view, drawn from human capital theory, which postulates unproblematically that closing the education gap will improve socioeconomic outcomes, irrespective of cross-cultural or intercultural contexts or territorial spaces, a view that seems to be shared by Noel Pearson and Helen Hughes, among others. I am no expert on education but I fail to see how standard education will assist those who live fundamentally non-standard lives.

Various combinations of these views have been readily adopted by

senior bureaucrats (and their protégés, as in my opening vignette) closely linked to Chicago School thinking who rose to have undue influence in key agencies during the late Howard years and, with bureaucratic inertia, to the present. These key bureaucrats were open to arguments for market-based technical solutions to complex, deeply entrenched and diverse development problems that correlated with their abstract theories: they both influenced political thinking and sought to please their conservative political masters.

In the post-Apology era¹⁵ and during an interregnum when there is no national Indigenous representative organisation, the Rudd government has continued with the rhetorical tenor of 'emergency' (the Rudd Opposition, after all, did support the Northern Territory Intervention) and the need to do something and quickly. That something is the development of NIRA in concert with the states and territories,¹⁶ NIRA though is not evidence-based but is highly ideological and formulated on clearly articulated neoliberal logics of economic deregulation, welfare state retreat, and a cultural trope of individual responsibility, while at the same time it locks in billions of dollars of public funding for a decade for Indigenous advancement through a series of National Partnership Agreements targeting initially just twenty-nine priority communities. Much of NIRA is focused on remote Australia (although in the COAG communiqué in July 2009 there was belated recognition that Closing the Gap might need to include non-remote Australia, where 75 per cent of Indigenous Australians live).

From the perspective of remote communities, NIRA is of concern for the following three reasons.

First, NIRA articulates 'principles' to incorporate those in remote locations into mainstream education and training and the market economy; and to promote personal responsibility and behaviours consistent with positive social norms. The aim is to encourage residents of remote communities to migrate up the settlement hierarchy where to-be-delivered education and job opportunities will be made available for an imagined gaps-free future. Nicholas Biddle has used census data to show that this is sheer fantasy:¹⁷ NIRA buys the 'Aboriginal culture is destructive' line

and so seeks to fundamentally alter kin-based societies to market-based individualistic societies. This is tantamount to the state actively seeking the destruction of remote Aboriginal societies whose very existence, sitting at times outside the market, challenges neoliberal principles, a possibility reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu's suggestion that neoliberalism is just a program for destroying collective structures which may impede pure market logic.¹⁸

Second, NIRA renders complex development problems 'technical', to use James Ferguson's term,¹⁹ both in financial input and statistical outcome terms; it is all just a simple equation, dollars in, statistical gap-closing outcomes out. Unfortunately, debates about people are becoming increasingly abstract and avoid reference either to history or to lived reality. For example, in NIRA straight-line trajectories for all Closing the Gap targets are provided to indicate precise progress, year in year out, in improving people's lives, in the abstract! It is noted in NIRA that such indicative trajectories are modelled from census and survey data and while considered reliable they do contain potential sources of error, including random sampling and/or non sampling errors.²⁰ Such qualifications will provide little solace for the subjects of improvement if they are among the targets missed.

Third, NIRA locks in resources for a decade, skewing them away from those who may be in greatest need just because they live in other than the nominated communities. NIRA is about picking a handful of development winners and is a risky strategy for Indigenous people in remote Australia. The latest government progress report on the Northern Territory Emergency Response Intervention (now more politely renamed Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory) indicates a worrying lack of progress at seventy-three prescribed remote communities.²¹ My personal observations at a number of prescribed communities that I have visited are that there is a higher degree of despondency, mainly linked to disempowerment, than I have ever seen before.

I want to make just one more observation here. NIRA, and the values-ism it espouses, is strictly for domestic consumption. Just a year after

the National Apology, Australia belatedly supported the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that the Howard government had failed to endorse. This is a detailed Declaration that took many years to develop. I want to refer to just two articles in the Declaration:

Article 26 Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired ...

Article 23 Indigenous peoples have the right to determine and develop priorities and strategies for exercising their right to development...²²

In contrasting principles articulated in NIRA and those in the UN Declaration I ask whether the Australian state has two faces, domestic and global, on Indigenous affairs. This is an issue I return to briefly in conclusion.

THE HYBRID ECONOMY AS A POLITICAL PROJECT

Despite the failure of the dominant development paradigm to deliver results for remote Indigenous Australia, there is an ongoing discursive, ideological and even intellectual commitment to this form of development, the modernisation paradigm revisited in the twenty-first century. To counter this dominant approach, an amalgam of state driven modernisation theory and neoliberal (not Keynesian) principles, I have developed the hybrid economy framework to influence policy thinking about development alternatives for people living culturally and geographically beyond the mainstream, usually but not always remotely.²³ In 2001 when I first used the term my aim was to bypass what I saw as an unproductive debate in Australia between progressives and conservatives as part of the history wars. I realise now that the challenge is actually greater than I imagined: it is to limit the adoption of potentially damaging neoliberal principles that still enjoy a global ascendancy, even after the Global Financial Crisis, into Indigenous policy instruments.

Paul Nadasday in his study of bureaucrats and hunters in Canada refers to Weber's observation on the nature of bureaucracy, that the development of a money economy is a presupposition of the bureaucracy.²⁴ Similarly, the Australian state assumes that Closing the Gap will require a full embrace of the market economy.

But the relatively late colonisation of remote Australia resulted in a less destructive transformation of the precolonial hunter-gatherer economy than elsewhere and today important elements of the customary economy remain productive. These elements provide a means to maintain land-based ways of life in many situations and has resulted in the emergence of a complex form of economy that includes state, market and customary sectors. This economic reality in remote areas is actualised through a diversity of economic forms and an array of sectoral overlaps that influence everyday livelihood strategies. An example, which I will return to, is when rangers are employed by the state to provide environmental services using Indigenous knowledge, while at the same time being at liberty to harvest wildlife for domestic use. The hybrid economy model, illustrated diagrammatically in figure 14.2, properly complexifies the nature of Indigenous economies in remote Australia beyond the usual private and public duality.

The hybrid economy is different everywhere, in form and in the nature of sectoral overlaps (areas 4, 5, 6 and 7 in figure 14.2) where most productive activity is undertaken. This variability is partly explained by

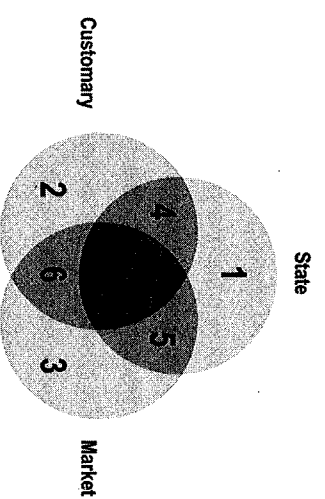


FIGURE 14.2 The Hybrid Economy Model

structural, cultural and environmental factors. In some places market opportunities in mining or tourism employment might exist, although what might appear an opportunity may be unacceptable from another perspective, as vignettes 1 and 2 clearly demonstrate.

The Indigenous visual arts sector in remote Australia is probably the best documented exemplar of intercultural production in the hybrid economy. Artistic production draws its inspiration from renewed connections to land, the sentient landscape and the sacred places in that landscape. Aboriginal art embodies high cultural values that accord well with western aesthetics and economic values. The monetary quantum of this sector has probably grown tenfold in the past twenty years as new place-based and identity-based movements continue to spring up. The production and marketing of art sits squarely in the intersection of customary, state and market sectors, usually in segment 7 of the hybrid economy model: inspiration and skills acquisition and the know-how to use naturally occurring resources are customary, while cross-cultural mediation with the market requires state patronage, and purchase is for cash.

In all situations, the precise nature of interculturality, the trade-offs individuals and groups make between engagements in kin-based domestic moral economies or market-based opportunity, varies. The existence and resilience of a customary sector is anathema to dominant neoliberal ways of thinking and the goal to bring all human action within the realm of the market.²⁵ Or perhaps the non-market is just poorly comprehended; after all its presence is unusual in late modernity. But for many Indigenous groups the resilience of customary ways and living by them provides a means to reduce dependency and associated risk of excessive state intrusion. The hybrid economy framework properly complexifies contemporary Aboriginal economies by including what happens in the non-monetised sector. The model properly reflects the agency of Aboriginal economic actors, as they make everyday choices, individually and in groups, to pursue a livelihood that can be conceptually placed in different sectors and particularly in the overlapping segments of the model.

DEVELOPMENT FUTURES IN THE HYBRID ECONOMY

The return of land under land rights and native title legal regimes has facilitated the emergence of hybrid economies with some elements in the mainstream labour market and others dependent on the customary for competitive advantage. Such marketing of custom has close parallels to a form of enterprise that John and Jean Comaroff have termed 'Ethnicity Inc' – the dialectical relationship between the often legal corporatisation of identity and the commodification of culture, sometimes requiring production using 'lawfare', western legal institutions.²⁶ Like the Comaroffs, I do not seek to present this commodification of culture as unproblematic, be it in tourism, the arts or in the provision of environmental services. But as in the comparative contexts provided by the Comaroffs, I also observe a reluctance in remote Australia for Aboriginal people to sell their labour in a standard way, preferring instead to be producers of commodified culture often in two directions, towards the market and simultaneously to local cultural reproduction.

I want to focus here briefly on the emergence over the past decade or so of an Aboriginal community-based, grassroots 'caring for country' movement that is seeing the use of Indigenous and local knowledge in the paid provision of environmental services. This is not an insignificant employer: it was estimated in 2006 that just on 400 Aboriginal people were employed as community rangers in the top part of the Northern Territory alone,²⁷ compared with only 176 Aboriginal people employed in the mining industry throughout the Northern Territory (in the 2006 Census).

The Indigenous estate that remained unalienated in the past, mainly because it had no commercial value, today includes some of the most biodiverse lands in Australia. But these lands are at risk of species contraction and face major threats from feral animals, exotic weeds, changed fire regimes and pollution.²⁸ On top of these threats, the latest available climate science suggests that substantial biodiversity impacts on this crucial part of the continental landmass are inevitable.

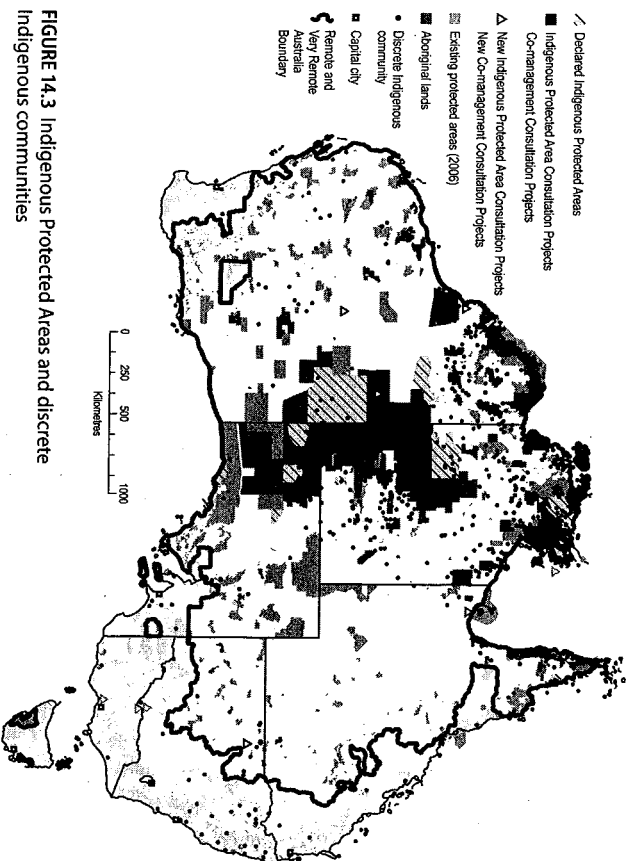


FIGURE 14.3 Indigenous Protected Areas and discrete Indigenous communities

There has been growing support from environmental agencies for Indigenous community-based efforts to ameliorate threats and minimise adverse biodiversity outcomes. Since 1997, thirty-three Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs) have been declared and supported over 230 000 square kilometres of Aboriginal-owned land that feature high natural and cultural heritage values and that will be managed for such values using forms of management that satisfy International Union for the Conservation of Nature guidelines. So the IPA program allows the Australian government to demonstrate to the global community that it is meeting international biodiversity obligations from the Indigenous estate. In 2007, a Working on Country program was established to pay Indigenous rangers wages that had been previously garnered from a variety of sources, including CDEP. Figure 14.3 shows the location of the currently declared IPAs. When small remote communities are added to the map, there is a high correlation between IPAs and people living on their land.

Aboriginal rights in land facilitated the declaration of IPAs and the emergence of an Australian version of 'Ethnicity Inc', based on the legal

corporatisation of identity (in IPAs) and the commodification of culture (in the provision of environmental services).²⁹ Interestingly, such corporatisation sometimes involves agreement between numerous separate land-owning groups to pool their lands into a commons that generates what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have termed a 'commonwealth'.³⁰ In the case of the Djelk IPA, declared on 25 September 2009 after lengthy consultation, over 100 land-owning groups agreed to 'corporatise' their traditional lands into an area of 6700 square kilometres to be jointly managed.

IPAs are evolving to be an exemplar of intercultural production. This is happening for many reasons. Rangers can work simultaneously in the customary, state and market sectors, in segment 7 in the hybrid economy model in figure 14.2. Segment 7 represents a form of 'bliss point' where people are paid to provide environmental services while engaged in customary activity to meet individual needs and broader family and kinship obligations – in the market and domestic moral economy simultaneously. Rangers confidently deploy Indigenous and local knowledge in their work on land and sea, with its success monitored and enabled by western technology, including the use of Cyberracker, global positioning systems and remote sensing, as well as vehicles, boats and helicopters. The use of Cyberracker in particular provides real-time evidence that environmental services and outcomes are being delivered while rangers work unsupervised on country – the use of such technology suits the rangers as well as state, corporate and philanthropic sponsors.

Rangers are delivering a wide array of services that include feral animal control and weed management, marine management and marine debris control, cultural and economic site management, management of critical fresh-water aquatic habitats, commercial sale of wildlife, surveillance services for Australian Customs, species autopsy for Australian Quarantine, and increasingly undertake prescribed burning to reduce fuel load. In Western Arnhem Land two IPAs, Wardaken and Djelk, are involved in the 17-year Western Arnhem Land Fire Abatement project, currently funded by a multinational corporation at \$1 million per annum, to abate

100 000 tonnes of verified carbon equivalent greenhouse gases per annum. These activities are funded from the Australian government and philanthropic sources, and provide national conservation as well as carbon reduction benefits.

The hybrid economy provides a framework that can be used politically by Indigenous people in remote Australia to directly challenge the popular myth that they are all just on passive welfare; and to advance arguments for more equitable access to resources that can be used productively and in the national interest. Such arguments will be essential if people are to continue to live on their land and have any chance of substantive – not statistical – equality. I am not suggesting that there are any easy development solutions to complex problems, but there is growing evidence that a suite of activities might provide livelihoods in remote and very difficult circumstances. I have recently promulgated the use of hybrid economy framework, alongside Aboriginal ownership of lands and seas, to demonstrate economic opportunity in northern development in areas as diverse as climate change, fresh water, carbon abatement, wildlife harvesting and the arts industry.³¹ The hybrid economy framework can be mobilised to alter the nation's visioning of economic futures for Aboriginal people living in remote Australia.

CHOICE MATTERS: CHALLENGING THE STATE PROJECT OF NORMALISATION

I have no illusions that hybrid economy thinking is currently subordinate to the very dominant discourse of mainstreaming predicated on engagement in the 'real' economy. I also have little doubt that national and global uncertainties, combined with Indigenous aspiration and agency and massive land holdings, make the diversity of the hybrid economy a less risky and more optimistic option than the imagined economic integration of remote living Aboriginal people into the mainstream, to become what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri identify in other global contexts as

a class of precarious workers, 'the precariat'.³² Making inroads into the dominant discourse of normalisation endorsed by all Australian governments will not be easy. But I am unwilling to stand by and allow a view of Aboriginal futures, over-influenced by neoliberal principles that appeared defunct not long ago, to go unchallenged. To enlist Hardt and Negri again, the 'challenge will be to translate the productivity and possibility of the poor into power'.³³

I am often asked whether the hybrid economy model that I promulgate has applicability beyond the tropical north where most of my research is focused. I suspect that it has applicability in any situation where there is a complex triangulated relationship between Indigenous Australians, the market and the state, plurality of values and some form of Indigenous leverage. It is important that the complexity and diversity often evident in such situations should be properly complicated rather than absurdly simplified into false binaries, like modern or primitive, metropolitan or remote, white or black, market or customary, individual or group.

The challenge we all face as anthropologists is getting beyond the dominance of a discourse that focuses only on capitalist economy and statistics so we can reintegrate people and different cultural systems into our analyses and interpretations. I am not suggesting here that all scholars have to be political, but I am warning that we must be wary of how our research might be used in public and policy discourse, be it with the co-option of a term like 'demand sharing' to justify racially based income quarantining (now termed 'management')³⁴ or allowing notions like 'the trouble with culture'³⁵ to give moral justification for the introduction of technologies to alter social norms (see Andrew Lattas and Barry Morris's essay, chapter 4).

The vignette with which I began encapsulates in part how the powerful Australian state is not responding to Aboriginal aspirations and desires – often glossed in the economic realm by the word 'development'. Instead, the project of improvement, to use Tania Murray Li's terminology,³⁶ is looking to reshape those Aboriginal values, beliefs, social relations and practices that remain distinct from mainstream norms. This project is not entirely new in the remote Australia context – it revisits earlier failed

attempts to shape Aboriginal subjectivities, to sedentarise, civilise, normalise, to 'develop' Aboriginal people. What is now different is that the project seeks to transform them into subjects of the global project of modernity, to become responsible citizens of a multicultural late liberal state, to be hard-working labourers or profit-driven entrepreneurs in a free market, to be capitalist consumers of mass culture.

I want to end on a hopeful note because there is just too much despondency in and about remote Indigenous Australia. And so I turn to Loïc Wacquant's reading of Pierre Bourdieu and his proposition that 'we construe the state, not as a monolithic and co-ordinated ensemble, but as a splintered space of forces vying over the definition and distribution of public goods, which he calls "the bureaucratic field"³⁷. Today the bureaucratic field is locked in a contest between what Bourdieu identifies as the Right hand and Left hand of the state, the former masculine and enforcing economic discipline, the latter feminine, administering social policies. In my analysis the dominant Right hand is represented in vignette 1 by development bureaucrats unsympathetic to Aboriginal aspirations to live and work on country. On the other hand, the support provided to the Caring for Country movement by environmental agencies as in vignette 3 represents the subordinate Left hand. Widening any emerging cracks in the bureaucratic field, especially given the uncertainty associated with late modernity, might see a re-valuing of the contributions made by Indigenous people living on country. In the current power/knowledge discursive struggle, an expert Indigenous discourse needs to be deployed over key emerging issues like global warming, climate change and biodiversity protection, highlighting the contributions that Indigenous knowledge systems and hybrid economies are making in the national interest. If this approach fails then it might be necessary to exploit the clear differences emerging between Australia's domestic position on Indigenous issues that emphasises values-monomism – the requirement to adopt mainstream social norms – and its endorsement at the global level of the values plurality embedded in numerous articles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

While I have focused here on the case of environmental services provision, the Australian state and Indigenous people need to negotiate development approaches that maximise opportunities in all sectors of the hybrid economy in different places if substantive equality is to be delivered. Development imposed from above in a technical and managerial manner will not deliver outcomes; what is required is the provision of opportunity to land-linked Aboriginal people to negotiate and shape the diverse forms of development to which they aspire, to enjoy choice of economic form to match the diversity and difference of Aboriginal values and norms.

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