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Self-reflections: 1977–2014¹

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When you talk about retiring, one question people start asking is how did you get to work in this area and stay in it for so long? So let me answer this question briefly.

I came to Australia from New Zealand in 1976 as a young academic with a Master's degree in economics from the University of Auckland and a job as a senior tutor at the University of Melbourne. My chair of department and supervisor was John Nieuwenhuysen. I had previously migrated with my family from Israel via India to New Zealand, so I had some cultural complexity in my own mix of identities. I had also done some fieldwork for my Master's degree in Western Samoa, supervised by the late Conrad Blyth, an unusual economist with historic links to The Australian National University (ANU) who was a firm believer in primary data collection.

In Melbourne I met and befriended a young Aboriginal man from Alice Springs, Kumanjay Willis, who was studying law. He lit my short fuse for social justice as we hung out together and I shared some of his experiences of racism first-hand. A year later I got an opportunity to work on a project with John Nieuwenhuysen funded

¹ This essay seeks to reflect as accurately as possible my closing comments to the Engaging Indigenous Economy Conference: Debating Diverse Approaches at The Australian National University on 5 September 2014.

by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra on Aboriginal economic status. Our approach was institutional and formal (Altman & Nieuwenhuysen 1979). Kumanjay Willis's social justice fire expired in 1981, just four years later, when he killed himself. Mine has not abated.

I was challenged by anthropologists, mainly Nicolas Peterson, and encouraged by the late economist Fred Fisk to seek an understanding of Aboriginal development via the concept of 'embeddedness'—about how human economy and making a livelihood were embedded in the social and cultural—and to simultaneously question whether there was a universal *Homo economicus*, Western rational economic man, that was deeply embedded as a competing concept in dominant and conventional economic thinking.

My research beginnings in this area occurred in the early post-assimilation era. Australia was discovering that, counter to thinking in the 1960s evident in books like Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country* (published in 1964), Aboriginal societies had not been extinguished. Indeed, in many situations distinct Indigenous non-Western norms, values, beliefs, orientations and practices were alive and well, even if altered.

With some assistance from the late Anthony Forge, and his partner in scholarly innovation John Mulvaney, I was awarded, after some struggle, a scholarship to undertake a doctorate in anthropology at ANU from 1978. Nicolas Peterson and Howard Morphy were my supervisors.

I drove from Canberra to the Maningrida region to undertake participant observation fieldwork in May 1979. Carefully following the instructions of my guide, the late Ray Nulla, I got deeply embedded in the Mann River for three days (Fig. 23.1). My bogging occurred right next to Mumeka outstation, which was unoccupied at the time as all residents—members of the highly mobile Kuninjku community—were at a *Kunabibi* ceremony at Mimanyar.

Three months later I was welcomed as an apprentice member of the Kuninjku community at Mumeka under the tutelage of Anchor Kalumba and his family (Fig. 23.2). I learned all about embeddedness by living with people and engaging in their very human economy. This was the tropical savannah and I was poorly adapted to the local

version of the mixed modern economy. Together with my classificatory Kuninjku kin we eked out a livelihood, me on my ANU scholarship being the most affluent at the outstation.

Fig. 23.1 Bogged in the Mann River Crossing, May 1979

Photo: Jon Altman Collection, courtesy of AIATSIS

Fig. 23.2 Anchor Kalumba at Mumeka, late 1979

Photo: Jon Altman Collection, courtesy of AIATSIS

I have never abandoned Mumeka and have been back there over 50 times. It is my second home even though I am neither Kurulk (a fictive land owner), nor Darngkolo (a fictive manager), but a Kardbam (a fictive affine).

I try to repay people there for my training and their hospitality at Mumeka by advocating for them and their very different way of living and by adhering to three long-held principles drawn from early training in philosophy and welfare economics. These principles are nicely summed up by Guy Standing (2014) in *A precariat charter: from denizens to citizens*:

- Security Difference Principle: a policy or institutional change is only socially just if it improves the security of the most insecure groups in society (among whom I count the Kuninjku);
- Paternalism Test Principle: a policy or institutional change is socially just if it does not impose controls on vulnerable groups that are not imposed on the most-free groups in society; and
- Dignified Work Principle: a policy or institutional change is only socially just if it promotes capacity to pursue work that is dignified and rewarding. This last principle explains in part my decades-long advocacy since 1977 for the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme as a basic income institution.

Postdoctorally, from 1983 I spent seven years at the then Research School of Pacific Studies in the Department of Political and Social Change. I competed successfully for a job looking for either a North Korea or north Australia specialist. I am not sure how many applied. My supervisor was the late Jamie Mackie, an academic deeply committed to social justice and the abolition of the White Australia policy in the 1960s.

In the 1980s I had postdoctoral opportunities unimaginable today. In particular I chaired reviews of the Aboriginals Benefit Trust Account (discussed by David Pollack, this volume) and the Aboriginal arts and crafts 'industry' (discussed by Marianne Riphagen, this volume), both for the Australian Government.

In the former I made recommendations that resulted in technical tinkering but not in radical change or political empowerment. My recommendations in the second review were adopted, a little

serendipitously, as the framework for Indigenous arts marketing support that remains today as the Indigenous Visual Art Industry Support program. Both resulted in at least some progressive legal and policy changes.

I was seduced by what seemed to be admirable state processes for policymaking: engage an academic to examine a complex policy issue at arm's length from government, collaborating and building consensus with Aboriginal and other stakeholders, to have influence with politicians via bureaucrats.

I made representations to the Miller Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs in 1985 to establish a research centre to keep operating in this productive way. Among the members of the Committee was the late HC 'Nugget' Coombs.

From 1985–90 I battled hard for the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) project. It was finally established by the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs in its dying days to assist the embryonic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) with independent university-based research to implement the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP). ATSIC backed CAEPR from 1990 to 2004, even if at times our research findings were extremely uncomfortable for it and the government.

On 7 May 1990 I gave a lecture at the then Commonwealth Department of Finance about recent reforms in Indigenous affairs. I asked if ATSIC was a bold attempt to swim against the mainstreaming tide and emerging 1980s neoliberal thinking and new public sector management. With hindsight I think it was, but ATSIC's goals to deliver some Indigenous-specific AEDP programs Australia-wide were aided by much grounded research from CAEPR.

In a nutshell, CAEPR's tasks were twofold:

- to advise on progress on the emerging grand national plan for convergence in outcomes for Indigenous and other Australians at a number of regional levels;
- to advise on how this might be facilitated and what it might look like in the continental and grounded diversity of Indigenous circumstances.

These two research and policy goals can be viewed from the twin disciplinary perspectives of economics and anthropology that were, and remain, in a healthy tension with each other (see Altman & Rowse 2005). Economics, with its focus on the quantitative and statistically abstract and theoretical, favours equality and sees difference as a negative indicator of inequality. Anthropology, with its focus on the qualitative, cultural and local, favours plurality and sees difference as a positive indicator of self-determination and choice.² This creative tension needs to be vigilantly kept in appropriate balance and it became a hallmark of CAEPR's research.

Our first workshop and first substantial publication *Aboriginal employment equity by the year 2000* (Altman 1991) told ATSIC and the Hawke government just what they did not want to hear: that the goal of statistical equality or sameness could not be delivered by 2000 as promised by then Prime Minister Bob Hawke. To use the words of Will Sanders (1991), it was a goal 'destined to fail'.

It is noteworthy that Indigenous Australians only became statistically visible after the 1967 Referendum, from the 1971 census onwards. Since then the self-identifying population has grown fivefold (Fig. 23.3).

Fig. 23.3 Indigenous census count 1971–2011

Source: Author's research with Francis Markham using published ABS data

2 At the conference I joked in poor taste that if one goes directly to *abstracta* (or theory) without *concreta* (or empirics) you get *excreta*.

It is mainly from the 1990s that statistical picturing with all its Foucauldian implications has become a growth industry in Indigenous policy research. CAEPR initially held a monopoly in this area and has consistently tracked, reported and often critiqued the goals of statistical sameness, practical reconciliation, closing the gap, Indigenous advancement, and most recently ‘parity’.

The evidence that gaps are not closing largely reflects colonial assumptions about what gaps are important and what is possible. Fig. 23.4 and Fig. 23.5 use five-yearly census data to show that, across a range of social and economic indicators, gaps have not closed nor reached parity in the last 40 years. Some are converging slowly, some are diverging, most will take decades to close if at all under current policy settings.

Fig. 23.4 Ratio of Indigenous to non-Indigenous employment and income outcomes, 1971–2011

Source: Author’s research with Francis Markham using published ABS data

Fig. 23.5 Ratio of Indigenous to non-Indigenous educational outcomes, 1971–2011

Source: Author’s research with Francis Markham using published ABS data

I have become increasingly critical of such statistical picturing. It is not that Indigenous subjective views are not canvassed and known, it is just that they are rarely reported or considered important in policy decision-making when they differ from the overarching goal of convergence. In special surveys like the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, information collected on Indigenous views invariably emphasises that language, ceremony and connection to country are fundamental to their views of well-being. But such statistics are generally overlooked in favour of preconceived ideas about what matters.

From the 1970s to the present we have seen a massive change in land titling in Australia. When I started in this area in 1977 the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cwlth) was just passed by the Fraser government. Today, 37 years on, 33 per cent of the Australian continent is under some form of diverse Indigenous tenure (Fig. 23.6).

Fig. 23.6 Land rights and ownership under three tenures, 2014

Source: Author's research with Francis Markham using a variety of sources

However, one needs to add people to these forms of tenure and when this is done using 2011 census information, it is clear that most Indigenous titles are in very remote Australia. Most Indigenous people—over 80 per cent—reside elsewhere, and might be depicted as ‘the invaded’ (Fig. 23.7). There are over 1,000 discrete Indigenous communities, as they are called by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, on or near Indigenous land (Fig. 23.8).

Fig. 23.7 Distribution of the Indigenous population, 2011

Source: Author's research with Francis Markham using a variety of sources

This mismatch between land, people and location is highly problematic for the project of sameness, but has seductive appeal for the project of difference or alterity.

This spatial picturing is challenging to vested capitalist and national interests that need continual access to the land for resource extraction. Kevin Bruyneel (2007), in *The third space of sovereignty*, notes that postcolonial possibility is opened up with land rights and then slammed shut by the settler state, especially if successful Indigenous enterprise is perceived as threatening the status quo.

Fig. 23.8 Distribution of discrete Indigenous communities

Source: Author's research with Francis Markham using a variety of sources

In 2004 the dam burst on ATSIC after 14 years of holding neoliberalism at bay as a policy regime embedded in institutions, class and ethnic relations and ideological norms. ATSIC was blamed for the apparent failure of so-called self-determination to deliver parity in socioeconomic outcomes and cultural norms between Indigenous and other Australians. CAEPR in turn was regarded with suspicion by the new Indigenous policy regime and fiscally punished and politically marginalised for its research support of ATSIC.

In 2007 we saw the debacle of the Northern Territory 'National Emergency' Intervention which signalled a dramatic turn in approach in Indigenous policy—the imposition of guardian Leviathan with complete disregard for evidence-based research produced by CAEPR and other academics over many years. I took a decisive stance against the Intervention based on a personal re-evaluation of the altered nature of the state. This was a crucial turning point in my approach as a policy scholar—on the back of the Intervention I felt it was no longer

possible to produce research in good faith that would be genuinely received by government at face value so as to influence policymaking decisions.

Since then, policy and its production has become more deeply confused and riddled with contradictions, relying less and less on evidence and increasingly on anecdote and ideology—a political consequence of history and culture wars. There has been a dilution in the role of the expert—unless the expert is supportive of the current dominant state project of improvement. There has also been a rapid increase in the number of research organisations and consulting firms willing and able to undertake research work to government-dictated agendas, as policy development has been commoditised and, in the name of competitive tendering, governments pick and choose. This has all made CAEPR's work more difficult, straining at times the need to balance a broad tripartite set of interest groups: Indigenous stakeholders in all their diversity, the policy community, and the academy. All need to be nourished while also kept at arm's length. This is a difficult juggling act.

The last four Australian governments have shifted the focus of Indigenous-specific policy interventions and expenditures to remote Australia, culminating in the current Indigenous Advancement Strategy, with all its evolutionary connotations. This is partly because remote communities are regarded as being both in greatest need and in need of greatest moral restructuring. They are also the most physically discrete and visible.

And yet their remoteness suggests that achieving parity in these places will be most difficult. In part because norms are most different; in part because market capitalism is most absent.

And so we see the deployment of more and more invasive and intensive and expensive technologies of government surveillance based on the behavioural assumption that remote Indigenous norms and practices can be readily replaced by assumed superior and usually imagined neoliberal norms and practices.

We see imaginative proposals to replicate southern development in the north and so provide precarious opportunity for Indigenous people in situ; or a need to attract or entice Indigenous people to take up diasporic living in the interests of their individual betterment and viability.

Simultaneously it is assumed that the process of parity is well under way in non-remote Australia, that the historical legacy of neglect, structural barriers like location, and the spectre of discrimination no longer matter. The playing field is assumed level and well-being is harshly judged as just a matter of individual agency, not sociopolitical structural factors and power relations. The evidence, and there is plenty of it, says something very different.

Paradoxically this path to parity, or imagined homotopia, a utopia of sameness, is being promoted just as Australia is entering a contrived Era of Austerity and just as the mining boom, proposed as a solution to fly in/fly out, orbiting or diasporic labour, is ending.

I have long held the view that we need to radically reform our current approach which is increasingly based on the imposition of neoliberal governmentality—the creation of inappropriate and punitive institutions to discipline—alongside policy and practice in the last decade that has looked to dilute and depoliticise, if not destroy outright, the community sector. At the same time it clings to some notion of capitalist economy for Indigenous Australia. This has recently re-emerged in the long-held discursive myth of ‘developing the north’.

Today, in 2014, policy challenges are greater in my view than in 1977. There is a rhetorical narrative of inclusion but a hardened practice of conditionality—inclusion only on certain terms. I have become increasingly sceptical of:

- the capacity of the state to deliver normal, let alone appropriate, services to Indigenous communities without the community sector;
- the appropriateness and validity of hegemonic, deficit-focused indicators of success, failure and accountability, and
- the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of Indigenous land owners as it seeks to recolonise Indigenous spaces and jurisdictions.

CAEPR today is an embedded institution at ANU, but at a precarious time for the promotion of a healthy diversity of views about the question of Indigenous development. Yet it is a research centre that is needed more than ever in a political environment that is unsympathetic to evidence-based and grounded multidisciplinary research (despite all the political noise to the contrary). Government is more likely to be influenced by ‘superstar’ reviewers like Andrew Forrest, a narrow range of key Indigenous political actors, ideology of a particular hue, and an overarching state project to embed neoliberalism in Indigenous Australia.

I encourage my academic colleagues to retain the productive, interdisciplinary tension that has been a hallmark of CAEPR since 1990; to manage the creative tension evident in multiple accountabilities to Indigenous Australians; to scholarship inclusive of teaching; and to informing policymakers and the general public. In my view it is especially important not to lose sight of actually existing Indigenous economies and societies out there and, as privileged university researchers, to always speak truth to power—a luxury that funded Indigenous organisations, modern bureaucrats, and captured vested interests do not enjoy.

When you say you are ‘retiring’ you elicit two other responses beyond ‘why did you start?’ The first is an assertion, ‘no you are not!’ The second is a question, ‘so what will you do next?’ To answer the second, I borrow a phrase from my friends Chips Mackinolty and Therese Ritchie: ‘Not Dead Yet’ (see Fig. 23.9). In the immediate future I plan to move to the multidisciplinary Regulatory Institutions Network in the College of Asia and the Pacific to continue my research as a ‘retired’ academic.

Fig. 23.9 Poster from *Not Dead Yet: A Retrospective Exhibition* featuring the work of Therese Ritchie and Chips Mackinolty

Source: Reproduced with kind permission of the artists

I am keen to work on honing my social justice and theoretical arguments while engaging with global scholarship about governance and sustainability and gaining greater understanding of the workings of power so as to better challenge the hegemony of embedded neoliberalism. In my view, this hegemony is doing economic violence not just to many Indigenous Australians, but also to others experiencing precarity in Australian society.

I am especially keen to continue advocating for people at Mumeka and in the Maningrida region and elsewhere to ensure that alternatives are considered. I have tried to do this in the last decade with an emerging theory of economic hybridity deployed as a heuristic device aiming to fundamentally reframe development thinking to focus on actually existing livelihoods. I want to further develop this model that is neither prescriptive nor 'problem solving': it aims to ask still more questions about Indigenous development in Australia and to empower Indigenous people with pushback possibilities.

I realise that I am leaving CAEPR at a difficult time, caught between the pressures of the current university environment and the current Indigenous affairs environment. I wish all my academic colleagues well in their challenging endeavours and will be watching their progress with great collegial interest from just across the ANU campus.

Postscript

Much of my watching will be from Melbourne where I relocated in October 2015, going full circle after 40 years by returning to the Australian city where my research on Indigenous economic development began. I failed 'retirement' and will begin as a research professor at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalization at Deakin University in February 2016, exactly 40 years after I migrated to Australia. I will retain my links with the Regulatory Institutions Network at ANU and so will be able to gaze across the ANU campus on visits from time to time.

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