

Rethinking Western perceptions of Indigenous knowledge and economy

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Abstract: This paper argues that the preservation and reclamation of Indigenous Knowledge is essential to the economic advancement of Indigenous Australians.

Keywords: Indigenous economy; Indigenous Knowledge

‘...maintaining our ancient cultural values, and aspects of the old ways of life, is not inimical to economic progress’.

Marcia Langton, 2012 Boyer Lectures

The question of Indigenous economy has only existed since the 1970s – coinciding and emerging out of the self-determination movement. In Australia, it is a field of study dominated by Professor Jon Altman, who has produced a significant body of work attempting to offer viable alternatives to the highly ineffective economic systems currently implemented in Indigenous communities, especially in remote townships and outstations. This essay argues that Marcia Langton’s position is, if anything, a dramatic understatement and that the pursuit of an economy with specific cultural underpinnings has the greatest potential for creating prosperous Indigenous futures. The concept of Indigenous Knowledge and its preservation and reclamation is an essential platform for the advancement of Indigenous economy.

John Altman’s “hybrid economy” offers a viable Indigenous future, which involves “growing activity in all sectors of the economy, the market, the non-market, and the state.” (Altman 2005, p.6) The majority of research conducted in this field regards the more remote Indigenous communities as they tend to maintain the old ways of life, which offer unique economic opportunities.



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A discussion of Indigenous economy should begin with a brief analysis of the field of economic anthropology in order to expand the restricted Western concept of “economy”. Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus” is useful in dismantling Western ideas of value and opens a gateway to explore the legitimacy of Indigenous cultural economy and create an argument against “mainstreaming” and the neo-liberal assimilation movements which are gaining broader support. The basic tenant of habitus is that all values are constructed by our environment. These become so ingrained that they are perceived to be natural laws rather than culturally constructed. Using Bourdieu as a guide, Radoll posits the existence of an “Aboriginal Field”, “where Indigenous agents develop their habitus and where production and reproduction of Indigenous practices are undertaken.” (Radoll 2010, p.3). Altman’s hybrid economy is persuasive in this context, because it encourages a fluid relationship between preservation and absorption of cultural and economic practices. Radoll’s claim also highlights the struggle to overcome the “durable dispositions” and deep seated behaviours, in both non-indigenous and Indigenous communities (Bourdieu 1991, p.123). Bourdieu regards the habitus of individuals to be both “durable, and adaptive”, meaning that new practices are often absorbed into existing cultural structures (Radoll 2010, p.7).

For many people, Langton’s reference to “ancient cultural values’ and the “old ways of life” conjures the image of an immovable and static Indigenous customary culture that is completely inaccessible from a Western viewpoint and inapplicable to their everyday lives. it has, like most Indigenous cultures, been “fetishized in a way that puts them beyond critical analysis” (Coulthard 2014, p.81-82). Apart from ignoring the diversity of practices which Indigenous Australians continue to engage in today, on a broader level “all cultures constitute fluid systems of meaning and representation that are continually constructed and reconstructed” (Coulthard 2014, p.82) through “complex dialogues and interactions with other cultures.” (Benhabib 2002, p. 184). The cultures of Indigenous Australia are irrevocably altered by interaction with European customs. Equally, the inception of the Australian nation was formed culturally, socially and politically upon the interaction between the two cultures. However, one of these cultures is deemed to be “progressive”, while the other is considered immobile. The truth is Indigenous culture has not been allowed to adapt. It has been denied both “the liberal principle of choice and the conservative principle of responsibility.” (Pearson 2014, p.44). Land Rights, resource management and Constitutional recognition have been limited, taken away, disregarded and abolished altogether, ever since European occupation. But what does this have to do directly with the economic progress of Indigenous Australians? The concept of Indigenous Knowledge is integral to understanding the basis of non-market Indigenous economic activity.

Babidge discusses the importance of the concept of “Indigenous Knowledge” in constructing a post-colonial relationship between Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Drawing from Foucault’s basic premise that knowledge is power, Indigenous Knowledge has “efficacy as a political tool” (Babidge 2007, p.151). Despite the common conception that there has been a simple “wearing away” of Indigenous culture by Western values, Babidge argues that it is “not because they have 'broken down' under pressure from modernity, but because such perspectives are a rejection of the notion of culture or group (or indeed their knowledge) as fixed” (Babidge 2007, p.152). Once it is acknowledged that there is a “hierarchy” of habitus, or rather, a society considers some habitus to be more legitimate than others, it becomes possible to dismantle this hierarchy and open the possibility for Indigenous Knowledge to function in Western institutions.

Indigenous Knowledge is already useful to these institutions. Fire management, ecologically sustainable wildlife harvesting and complex knowledge of the medicinal and nutritional value of Australian flora and fauna has profited researchers, corporations and the state. Adopting Indigenous Knowledge in Western practices will help avert one of the biggest threats facing humankind: climate change. The 2008 Native Title Report posited that Indigenous Knowledge “will be required to contribute to mitigate and adapt to climate change in the national interest.” (Calma 2008, p.212). However, across the world Indigenous Knowledge has not adequately profited Indigenous people. Biopiracy is the act of adopting Indigenous Knowledge in Western products and practices, exploiting their weak legal protections and patenting the use of these knowledges for economic gain. It is therefore important that certain knowledges retain their exclusivity to Indigenous people.

Sally Babidge explores the ways that Indigenous communities protect elements of their knowledge through what she describes as “Management Speak”. She posits that “indigenous knowledge practices are not confined to the management of resources but include the management of people in relation to resources.” (Babidge 2007, p.151). This is not surprising considering the “kin-based social relations, languages and practices that are non-mainstream and distinctly Indigenous.” (Altman, 2010, p.115). This extends also to non-indigenous researchers who are made aware of only certain knowledges under the cultural laws of the specific Indigenous people. However, without legal protections Indigenous Knowledge is open to appropriation and economic exploitation. The other issue is that these Knowledges, even when they are adopted, are seen to be far inferior to Western science. John Briggs conducted research on the tension between these two frameworks and concluded that “Western science is seen to be open, systematic and objective, dependent very much on being a detached centre of rationality and intelligence, whereas indigenous knowledge is seen to be closed, parochial, unintellectual, primitive and emotional.” (Briggs 2005, p9). He argues however that “indigenous knowledge has an advantage over western science in the context of poor communities, in that information is tested in the context of survival, and hence is not just true or false in some sort of dispassionate way” (Briggs 2005, p10). Greater understandings of the different advantages of the various systems needs to be embraced if there is to be understanding between the different cultures and therefore a greater incentive to improve the economic potential of this knowledge.

These concepts relate closely to the constitutional recognition campaign and the importance of increased Indigenous representation in Australian politics, as Coulthard writes: “the capacity to effectively interject our unique perspectives into the conceptual spaces where rights are formed.” (Coulthard 2014, p.465). One of the core concepts in Pearson’s thesis is that the increased prominence of Indigenous culture and values in mainstream Australia increases the recognition, and thus monetary value, Australian society places on Indigenous cultural activity. But what non-indigenous values are preventing the transition towards Indigenous government? Richard Howitt argues that three discourses have become naturalised under Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’: “*emptiness, occupation and possession.*” (Howitt 2012, p.818) These assumptions are embodied in the Australian constitution under section 51 and 25, but also in the lack of any preamble detailing the existence of Australian people prior to colonisation, thus prescribing to the idea of *Terra Nullius*. Howitt argues that Indigenous efforts to grow economically “are continually undermined by discursive re-inscription of these fictions in contemporary state policies and political, economic and social practices.” (Howitt 2012, p.818). The way to counter this is by “reshaping Australians’

geographical imaginaries” (Howitt 2012, p.818). This can be achieved, according to Howitt, with “Genuinely pluralistic outcomes that accommodate Indigenous self-determination, social and environmental justice.” (Howitt 2012, p.827).

Aspects of the argument so far would seem to suggest that the complete absence of government and an isolationist policy would allow Indigenous customary activity to grow and increase. But this completely ignores the centuries of displacement and psycho-existential damage inflicted on Indigenous people which prevents their immediate return to a purely customary lifestyle. It also ignores inescapable forces of globalisation and the market place. Indigenous communities have to have the capacity to “exercise real control over the relationship between Indigenous People and non-Indigenous governments and Transnational Corporations.” (Anderson 1999, p.9). The conservative view that Indigenous Australians in remote communities are simply “preserving a traditional hunter-gatherer economy inside a modern capitalist one” (Altman 2005, p.4) implies that Indigenous People have no relationship to the market or the state. This doesn’t recognise that the first priority of many Indigenous people is improving their economic prospects through a fluid cultural framework, which acknowledges “without an economic base the culture is either dying or dead.” (Anderson 1999, p.11).

The current reverse trend towards assimilation policies has been prompted by what Altman describes as the “discourse of failure” (Altman 2007, p.2). The successive policies of various governments and leaders, from Hawke’s 1987 Aboriginal Employment Development Policy to the Rudd’s *Closing the Gap* policies on life expectancy, numeracy and literacy rates and employment opportunities, are responses to the perceived failure of self-determination policies. It is not that urgent action is not needed on the immediate social problems facing Indigenous communities, it is that these policies are being implemented at the expense of self-determination. There needs to be a “realism about history” that acknowledges “decades of neglect” and projections that infer “it will take decades—even over a century—before gaps are eliminated.” (Altman 2007, p 4). While the state is encouraging economic independence as a solution to some of these issues, it is based on Western markets. Altman surmises this position, “The state promulgates false expectations while dismantling the policy machinery of the self-determination era, land rights, native title, ATSIC and CDEP.” (Altman 2007, p.5). There is a wealth of historical evidence pointing to the fact that “Colonial powers will only recognise the collective rights and identities of indigenous peoples insofar as it does not throw into question the background legal, political and economic framework of the colonial relationship itself.” (Coulthard 2014, p.42). Powerful Indigenous legal prerogatives need to be established to protect and extend Native Title and self-determination policies.

In the 1970s many Indigenous people living in remote townships moved to outstations on their traditional land. The momentum of this movement has been largely halted by over a decade re-emergence of assimilation-like policies. There are several assumptions at the heart of this counter-movement. Firstly, that self-determination policies aren’t working. That they have not alleviated the social malaise of many Indigenous communities, and have even promulgated it. Second, that customary activity is not “integrated with the modern capitalist economy.” (Altman 2005, p.4) and therefore the only options are a combination of welfare and economic assimilation.

Under Altman's model of hybrid economy, participation in the traditional Western market economy and state services need not be sacrificed altogether. Although there certainly are reduced opportunities for significant market involvement in any remote community, Altman believes it "is highly contestable how effectively they would compete for employment, owing to historic legacy" if Indigenous Australians in remote communities migrated to economic hubs (Altman 2005, p.1). Additionally, there are several fields of employment that Indigenous Australians are already involved in which are essential, especially to the ecological sustainability of about 20% of the landmass of Australia. Indigenous people in remote communities are in a unique position, through Indigenous Knowledge and geographical position, to capitalise on the value of this land. This includes wildlife harvesting, especially of feral animals, Aboriginal art and ecological management.

An obstacle to the economic growth of these industries is that they fall under the banner of "customary activity" and so payment for these services is made instead to the Community Development Employment Program: "The state and public enjoy its cost effectiveness but are reluctant to pay for such eco-services provision at market rates." (Altman 2005, p.5). A result of this is that "National Resource Management is grossly under resourced" (Altman 2005, p.5). This plays into the more systemic problem of the undervalued contribution Indigenous Australian's make to non-Indigenous Australia when the reality is that "customary activity is contemporary and heavily integrated with the modern capitalist economy." (Altman 2005, p.4).

Every day Indigenous communities are seeking to expand their economic prospects through a fluid cultural framework and habitus that maintains cultural values and incorporates new practices. However, the simultaneous exploitation and dismissal of Indigenous Knowledge has trapped Indigenous communities in an economic stasis, without the knowledge capital to effect significant change. Altman's hybrid economy is the first model that explicitly acknowledges the necessity of incorporating multiple methods of economic development. In addition, only through a broader appreciation of Indigenous cultural capital and Indigenous Knowledge will there be movements to protect this knowledge from non-indigenous motivations. This movement should start with recognition, constitutional or otherwise, of the prejudices embodied in Western institutions against Indigenous cultural and economic systems.

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