

The dust of fact: a view from the ground

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I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of this land, the Ngambri-Ngunnawal People. I pay respect to elders past and present and I pay tribute to the spirit of collective dreaming and collective hope.

Contrary to those who maintain that both dreaming and hope are as ethereal and impractical as the proverbial fairies at the bottom of the garden I wish to argue three key points in this paper:

- 1 that those who experience exclusion are valuable bearers of knowledge on the conditions that cause, maintain and exacerbate their exclusion;
- 2 that NGOs are in a unique position to act as conduits for this knowledge while governments are not only well-positioned but obliged to act on this knowledge;
- 3 and that this knowledge provides a persuasive argument for a collective dreaming and a collective hope anchored in reality.

I make these arguments at a time when fashionable distractions, some of which, like income management, start as useful tools but find themselves transformed into harmful weapons, achieve the status of anthems celebrating a narrow and exclusive sense of nationhood or promising deliverance from social ills. As powerful as these anthems are, I take heart in the observation of Palestinian poet, Mourid Barghouti (2005:61) when he notes, in his reflections on the oppression of his people that:

"... the dust of fact is more powerful than the mirage of an anthem."

1

It might seem obvious that those who are experiencing exclusion are particularly well placed to analyse the reality that is imposed upon them.

Attempts to perform, let alone communicate, these analyses, however, are massively constrained by a dominant discourse that appears to comprehensively reframe their reality.

Let me give you a significant example.

In his 2006 address at the Westin Hotel to mark the Tenth Anniversary of his Prime Ministership, the then Prime Minister, John Howard, set out the five challenges facing the nation. The fifth challenge, as he saw it, was framed as being the greatest:

"...that is to maintain our great national unity, our social cohesion and above all our egalitarian spirit. I am proud of what this Government has done to modernise our social welfare system and to support the weak and vulnerable in our society. And we run the risk of not talking about this enough because our great economic strength has given us the capacity to do this. We need to find innovative ways to break the vicious cycles of poor parenting, low levels of education, unemployment and health problems that can afflict some individuals and communities. And we need to reinforce the virtuous cycles of caring families, strong learning environments, good jobs and healthy lifestyles that allow others

to succeed in a competitive world. We need to find ways of restoring order to zones of chaos in some homes and communities, zones of chaos that can wreck young Australian lives."

The whole point of the former Government's idea of a social coalition in welfare policy was that Government would play its role, but individuals and families and businesses would also have responsibilities to fulfil if Australia were to truly tackle disadvantage in our community.

The "zones of chaos" metaphor is both powerful and provocative. It bespeaks the strategic assumption of a national or global order that is endangered by the exceptions to this order.

It is noteworthy that, rather than using the language of exclusion or marginalisation here, the "zones" discourse constructs individuals, homes and then communities as being either unwell or unlawful. Implicit in this practice is the affirmation of the place of these individuals, homes and communities within the normative economic, social, legal, moral and political framework that "all of us" call Australia.

By employing this discursive practice the individuals, homes and communities are blamed for their own alleged pathology and/or criminality. In either case their condition is understood as a moral, as opposed to structural and historical, problem and, most importantly, the problem is theirs to solve by their own resolve, albeit with a goodly dose of what US academic Lawrence Mead described as "the close supervision of the poor". The Northern Territory Intervention was the perfect exemplar of this paradigm. Significantly it was especially characterised by a monumental lack of awareness or even interest in the analyses of those who would come under its control.

I have devoted an unseemly amount of space to what some might argue is a chapter of social policy history that has largely been superseded. The truth, however, is that it has not been superseded. Witness the current Federal Government's decision to roll-out compulsory income management on people on the basis of the social security benefit they receive combined with the fact they live in a designated "zone of chaos". This is a completely untargeted and discriminatory practice that extends the current racist imposition that was part of the NT Intervention to an imposition that can only be described as being based on class.

So how can the dust of fact be seen, heard, felt, smelt and even tasted? For a start we must eschew the patronising notion that the local is somehow a world unto itself, a little pocket of chaos or excellence morally reflective of the degree of cleverness and hard work of its inhabitants. Manuel Castells (1998:6), the Spanish social theorist, characterised the current stage of globalisation as "informational capitalism":

"... The most critical distinction in this organizational logic is to be or not to be - in the network. Be in the network, and you can share and, over time, increase your chances. Be out of the network, or become switched off, and your chances vanish since everything that counts is organized around a world wide web of interacting networks."

So the arena in which the so-called "chaos" dominates is characterized by: a network society (both technologically and socially), in which inclusion is an indicator of social security and exclusion is a ticket to the informal economy (crime), reliance on structures of public or private welfare, or poverty.

It is in this context that the current Australian retrenchment of social security arrangements must be analysed. As Wilensky (1975:1) described it:

"The essence of the welfare state is government-protected minimum standards of income, nutrition, health, housing and education, assured to every citizen as a political right, not charity."

Arie de Ruijter (1998:3) of Utrecht University highlighted the concrete effects of this retrenchment of the welfare state:

"An effect of recent cuts in the provisions of the (western) welfare states is to increase the risks to the survival of the more vulnerable individuals and groups.... what seems to be taking place is an at least partial formation of a social underclass. Consequently, the so-called highly developed countries may become sites of processes which were regarded as characteristic of the Third World until recently. Groups of individuals who have been excluded throughout their life or during a particular stage in the life-cycle in various domains (work, healthcare, housing, education, citizenship) are increasingly confronted with the consequences of the absence of protective structures or safety-nets of the social security system.... The retreat of the government in (western) welfare states has consequences not only for questions of social cohesion but also for social inequality.... Some analysts predict a far-reaching polarization of income relations, leading to a bi-partition within societies.... What is increasingly at stake is the differential access to the formal labour system. An important role is played in this respect not just by education and social background, but also by factors such as ethnicity and gender."

An exclusionary network is increasingly produced, outside of which the rights of the individual are denuded and the responsibility of society is nullified:

"... ultimately, networks - all networks - come out ahead by restructuring, even if they change their composition, their membership, and even their tasks. The problem is that people, and territories, whose livelihood and fate depend on their positioning in these networks, cannot adapt so easily. Capital disinvests... networks readapt, bypass the area (or some people), and reform elsewhere, or with someone else. But the human matter on which the network was living cannot so easily mutate. It becomes trapped, or downgraded, or wasted. And this leads to social underdevelopment, precisely at the threshold of the potentially most promising era of human fulfilment." (Castells 1998:7)

More than downgraded, it is arguable that the people referred to here are actually degraded. As Galbraith (1984: 252) put it so well:

"They are degraded, for, in the literal sense, they live outside the grades or categories which the community regards as acceptable."

My second point is that nongovernment organisations are in a unique position to act as a conduit for the knowledge carried by the people who are degraded and demonised and that all tiers of government are obliged to act on this knowledge.

When you look at the history of progressive social change in Australia it is easy to see the pattern of change being generated from below. It has always been progressive social movements that have successfully articulated the need for reform. Governments, in rare moments of insight have embraced these social struggles and introduced legislation that actually went to the heart of the social problems. Real solutions, of course, can only emerge from the concrete conditions of the problem and the contradictions therein. Think of the history of the struggles for women's rights, industrial rights, Aboriginal rights, tenants' rights, the rights of people with disabilities, environmental justice, the provision of social housing and refuges for women and children escaping domestic violence and, more recently the magnificent turn-around in the attitudes to children and their families in mandatory detention. I note with great sadness the recent race to the bottom between Government and Opposition on the issue of stemming the so-called tide of people legitimately seeking asylum in our country.

NGOs can, of course, adopt an instrumentalist position *vis a vis* governments, offering to police and support an unjust status quo in return for favourable treatment and buckets of funding. We can also play a degrading and humiliating role in perpetrating the false notion of moralising as to who is deserving or undeserving of our paternalistic largesse. I am deeply suspicious of the popular trend which posits NGOs as the answer to all manner of problems, thereby enabling governments to abrogate their responsibilities.

My own organisation, I am happy to say, refused, for example, the overtures of the previous Federal Government when it initiated a programme of Financial Case Management for people who had been breached by Centrelink. The idea was that Government would fund charities to case-manage these people, making them feel the humiliation of having to depend on a charity after having been denied their rightful social security benefit.

The founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society, a 19th century French activist academic, Frederic Ozanam, once wrote: *"Charity is the Samaritan who pours oil on the wounds of the traveller who has been attacked. It is the role of justice to prevent the attack."*

I put into you that charity, be it warm or cold, is never a substitute for justice.

I also put it to you that it is the duty of governments to ensure that justice and equitable access is guaranteed for people. Similarly NGOs have a duty to place their resources at the service of people so that they might tell their stories and move all of us along the path of genuine liberation. It was Lilla Watson and a group of Aboriginal activists in Queensland in the 1970s who said:

*"If you have come to help me you are wasting your time.
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine then let us work together."*

3

My third point is that it is profoundly unrealistic *not* to dream and *not* to hope. Based on the history of social, economic, technological, political, cultural and intellectual change, the truth is inescapable. All is in an incredible and sometimes dizzying state of flux. There are classes in any given society that are more vulnerable to the negative impacts of change and others who will benefit disproportionately. Most of us accept this as a reality. What we often fail to see is the amazing connectedness and relationality of all that is happening. We fail to see how things, or rather processes, are linked. Hence the dogged resistance by some to the notion that climate change could possibly be related to human activity or that the colonised nations of our planet are still reaping the toxic social and economic fruits of their despoliation and dispossession.

In 1998 Manuel Castells wrote:

"This world is composed of people, and territories, that have lost value for the dominant interests.... Some of them because they offer little contribution as either producers or consumers. Others because they are uneducated or functionally illiterate. Others because they become sick or mentally unfit. Others because they could not afford the rent, became homeless and were devoured by life in the streets. Others who, unable to cope with life, became drug addicts or drunks. Others because, in order to survive, they sold their bodies and their souls, and went on to be prostitutes of every possible desire. Others because they entered the criminal economy, were caught, and became inhabitants of the growing planet of the criminal justice system.... And places, entire places become stigmatized, confined by police, bypassed by networks of communication and investment." (Castells 1998:10)

This analysis is just as pertinent to the global declaration of failed states as zones of chaos warranting military interventions as it is to the paternalistic declaration of postcodes of disadvantage as sites of purportedly necessary albeit discriminatory treatment of its population. [UN-HABITAT's Global Report on Human Settlements 2003: The Challenge of Slums](#) makes for instructive reading in the light of this.

It is just as absurd to accept an unjust status quo as it is to rest on our laurels and believe that social gains won by long struggles in the past are inviolate in the present or the future. When social movements ossify into top-heavy organisations the loss of meaning ends up coupling with the loss of groundedness, the loss of contact with the people who give the movement meaning. I make this observation for both government and nongovernment organisations. In some ways I make it as a sneak attack on the very notion that the differences between the two are as great as either side would like to believe.

The key to allowing hope to disrupt the institutionalised inequality of structures and histories is that we do not allow ourselves to be cut off from the people who carry the burden of change.

As Augustine of Hippo wrote:

“Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage: anger at the way things are and courage to make sure that things do not remain the way they are.”

But hope is often brutally suppressed when it is atomised and cut off from others who share that hope that another kind of society is possible. As the Indigenous Brazilian proverb reminds us:

*“When we dream alone it is only a dream
But when we dream together it is the beginning of reality.”*

The 1975 Commission of Inquiry into Poverty (1975:viii) prescribed a frighteningly simple antidote to the growth of poverty and inequality in Australia:

“If poverty is seen as a result of structural inequality within society, any serious attempt to eliminate poverty must seek to change those conditions which produce it.”

One Poverty Inquiry later, we have witnessed a systematic programme of ensuring that marginalised people would pay the price of labour market flexibility and profitability arising from the marketisation of essential services.

It is imperative that this analysis end on a note of hope. Let us then give the last word to Bertolt Brecht (1976), who knew the meaning of dark times. He wrote, and let this be both a warning and an encouragement to all of us, government and non-government alike:

*“Because things are the way they are,
things will not stay the way they are.”*

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