ResearchOnline@ND

University of Notre Dame Australia
ResearchOnline@ND

Arts Conference Papers

School of Arts

2008

Sustaining Indigenous futures? Welfare reform and responsibility for the other

Cate Thill
University of Notre Dame Australia, cthill@nd.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_conference

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

This conference paper was originally published as:
Thill, C. (2008). Sustaining Indigenous futures? Welfare reform and responsibility for the other. *Sustaining Culture: Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia*.

This conference paper is posted on ResearchOnline@ND at http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_conference/1. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.

Sustaining Indigenous futures?
Welfare reform and responsibility for the other[1]

Cate Thill
University of Notre Dame, Sydney

Debates about the provision of welfare over the past decade have been founded upon an increasing concern with the responsibilities of welfare recipients. In Australia, as elsewhere, the emphasis has been on recipients' responsibility to rise above their circumstances (no matter how constraining) in order to 'give something back' to society. This practice of 'responsibilisation' has recently been extended to parents and residents of certain remote Northern Territory and Far North Queensland communities, in response to an inquiry into the protection of Aboriginal children from sexual abuse (Northern Territory Government 2007). Parents and community members have an enforceable obligation to control and civilise their own conduct as well as that of their children (see Yeend & Dow 2007).

The approach to welfare reform in Indigenous communities introduced by the former Howard Government is punitive and paternalistic. Aboriginal parents and community members are subject to a new income management regime in cases of child neglect or by reason of geographical location. Indeed, in seventy-three designated Northern Territory communities the reforms are obligatory and indiscriminately applied to all residents (Altman 2007, p. 311). Income management diverts all or part of a person's hitherto inalienable benefit payments to a special account for the provision of priority needs. Worryingly, specific details about the circumstances that trigger subjection to income management—for those who do not inhabit prescribed NT communities—and the precise meaning of priority needs are not spelt out in legislation. The bill also eschews the principle of anti-discrimination (Yeend & Dow 2007, pp. 7, 4).

Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)
Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)
UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007
http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm

Influential Indigenous leader Noel Pearson (2000) has long supported this kind of intervention as part of a broader solution to community dysfunction, child abuse and neglect. Indeed, the legislation implements Cape York welfare reform trials that extend income management and other measures to specified Far North Queensland communities based on recommendations put forward by Pearson and the Cape York Institute (2007). Pearson's support for welfare reform is, however, grounded in albeit a contested positive alternative vision of reciprocal responsibility, economic development and self-determination.

Broadly bipartisan support indicates that the latest welfare reform measures are likely to have a significant effect on the future of Indigenous citizenship. While the Howard Government has recently been replaced by a more progressive Labor government, the new government remains committed to the changes in their current form until a review scheduled for mid-2008. The review, as well as the more collaborative approach of the current government, renders careful critical analysis and public scrutiny of Indigenous welfare reform an urgent and productive task. Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1969), this paper questions the normative assumptions underpinning these changes. Negatively, I question two frameworks for thinking about responsibility that inform Indigenous welfare reform; namely, protection and mutual obligation. Positively, I argue for an alternative approach to welfare reform that both foregrounds a sense of responsibility for the other and sustains alterity.

Welfare provision and responsibility

Most immediately, the welfare reform measures targeting Indigenous people are based on the concept of protection. Aboriginal people, families and communities are represented as being in need of protection from themselves or, more specifically, from anti-social behaviours such as child and substance abuse. On this view, income management is a

technique of 'responsibilisation' designed to punish Indigenous people for their failure to take responsibility for 'controlling and civilising' both their conduct and their children (Clarke 2005, p. 451). The punishment, alongside subjection to paternalistic controls, is the quarantining of fifty percent of income support and family assistance payments as well as one hundred percent of lump sum and baby bonus payments (FaHCSIA 2008).

Welfare reform in Australia is also grounded in the notion of 'mutual obligation'. Here *ressentiment* on the part of the hardworking, taxpaying community is manifest towards those reliant on public benefits. On the one hand, ordinary members of the Australian community are characterised as righteous insofar as they assume responsibility for their own security by working hard, paying their taxes and purchasing private insurance. Indigenous populations, on the other hand, are represented in terms of welfare dependency, as both failing to live up to this norm of self-responsible community membership and being 'a drain on public resources' (Lawrence & Gibson 2007, p. 659). In this context, the belief that the latter group 'should do something "in return for" public income support assumes a self-evident quality' (Yeatman 2004, p. 83).

Both the discourse of protection and that of mutual obligation represent Indigenous people as 'failed' citizens and, at the same time, render citizenship dependent on the exercise of self-responsible, civilized conduct. In keeping with the broader discourse of mutual obligation and despite evidence that Indigenous populations are severely under-resourced (see Lawrence & Gibson 2007, p. 659), the emphasis is somewhat perversely on Aboriginal people's responsibilities to the 'community' and not vice versa. The danger here is that this focus on the problem of self-responsibility occludes any sense of responsibility for others and thereby fosters indifference towards Indigenous people and communities.

Responsibility for the other

Levinas offers a framework for thinking about responsibility wherein, above all else, the subject is responsible for the other. This responsibility emerges in the ethical or face-to-face relation, in which the encounter with the other calls the self to justify its existence. According to Levinas,

> the Other qua Other is situated in a dimension of height and of abasement – glorious abasement; he [sic] has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and, at the same time, of the master called to invest and justify my freedom. (cited in Secomb 2007, pp. 60-61)

The relation to the other is not one of mutual obligation, in which the other is reciprocally responsible to the self. Rather, in the face of hunger and even death, the self is primarily hostage to the needs of the other (Levinas c1985, p. 98-100).

Importantly, in Levinas' conception of the ethical relation the singularity of the other and the self is upheld. Insofar as the other manifests itself as face it ruptures cultural meaning and presents a radical limitation to the experiences of the self. Put simply, the self cannot experience the materiality of the world in precisely the same way as another. This implies that responsibility to the other involves appreciating her or his alterity and accepting that this alterity exceeds the experiences of the self (Oksala 2005, p. 204). At the same time, to the extent that the other calls the self to responsibility, then the face-to-face relations also function as the condition of emergence for the unique capacity of the self to respond to the needs of the other. This suggests that the self can command resources on its own behalf and thereby both refuse the invocation inherent within the ethical relation and greet the other with hospitality (Levinas 1969, pp. 215-216; Levinas c1985, pp. 100-101).

A couple of objections regarding the applicability of Levinas' framework to the issue of Indigenous welfare reform might be raised at this point. Firstly, it potentially figures white Australians as hosts and Aboriginal people as strangers in their own land. Indigenous people's status as the original inhabitants of Australia does not, however, make Levinas' ethical relation untenable. Rather, it reformulates this imperative as historically and culturally specific and foregrounds a particular sense of responsibility for the ways in which 'my place in being … [is] already usurpation, already violence with respect to the other' (Levinas 1999, p. 179).

Secondly, Levinas' account of ethical responsibility is not a framework that can be readily transformed into a political program. Nonetheless, a salient feature of his perspective concerns the imbrication of ethics and politics. Robert Bernasconi (2002) interprets the ethical direction Levinas presents—the sense of non-indifference towards responsibility for the other—as something that governs not only interpersonal but also political relations. For Levinas, ethical responsibility is first principle and, while he acknowledges that the requirements of justice have a necessary place, he maintains that ethical responsibility provides the impetus for justice and thereby remains indispensable in a different and more profound sense.

The conception of rights that Levinas (c1999) provides usefully exemplifies this point. He argues that rights are founded upon a feeling of responsibility for the other. Conventional liberal accounts tend to reduce rights to the function of brokering a mutual compromise between the competing interests of an array of sovereign individuals within a political community. By contrast, Levinas contends that insofar as human sociality depends on people limiting their freedom for the sake of others, then the meaning of rights necessarily exceed the interests of the self. Here rights emerge out of a sense of good will towards the figure of the stranger, which represents the radical alterity of the other (Levinas c1999, p. 149).

Linnell Secomb (2007) argues that social rights, in particular, reveal a trace of Levinas' ideal of ethical responsibility in everyday life. That is, the income support and social services provided to vulnerable members of society are, at least in part, a way of responding to the needs of others. In practice, social welfare may be inadequate. It may be motivated by a less than altruistic concern to secure ourselves from future contingency and enforce some form of mutual obligation such as an effort by recipients to exercise self-responsibility. Despite this Secomb insists that—albeit to a limited extent—a trace of responsibility for the other is sustained (2007, p. 61).

Following Levinas and Secomb, then, I suggest that social rights are governed by a sense of non-indifference towards our responsibility for the other and cannot be reduced to the principle of responsibility-for-self. It is, however, important to question the extent to which this non-indifference governs Indigenous welfare reform in the present. Most immediately, it would seem that these measures represent a straightforward abandonment of ethical responsibility for the other. Not only are benefits made conditional on the exercise of self-responsible civility but recipients are also subjected to paternalistic control. On the other hand, it is possible to interpret recent initiatives targeting Aboriginal people as a re-codification rather than an abandonment of discourses of social rights, so that arguably a faint trace of responsibility for the other remains evident.

Indeed, Rebecca Lawrence and Chris Gibson (2007) make clear that the former Howard Government's policy of welfare reform is a shrewd (if rather offensive) re-deployment of campaigns for Indigenous autonomy and citizenship rights. It can be interpreted then, at least in part, as a response to challenges by Indigenous activists during the 1990s directed at the overly bureaucratic welfare state, which served to stifle the provision of even basic services to Aboriginal people and communities (Lawrence & Gibson 2007, p. 661). More specifically, prominent Indigenous leader Noel Pearson's demand for the 'right to a real economy' (2000, p. 154), as well as his criticisms of the apparent culture of 'welfare

dependency' within Indigenous communities, are articulated with and function to legitimise the Government's mutual obligation approach as a response to community expectations. A statement made by the former Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough, illustrates this point:

> In late 2005, Noel Pearson and the [Cape York] Institute approached the Howard Government with a proposal to radically change the way welfare was administered to remote Indigenous communities in the Cape … The Institute told us that … welfare offered these communities little more than a pathway to lifelong dependency. Communities want changes that ensure parents are held to account for the education and care for their children and incentives created for young people to aspire to a future which gives then choices and opportunity … (cited in Johns 2007, pp. 325-6)

Significantly, Lawrence and Gibson's analysis of the discourse of mutual obligation and Pearson's invocation of this framework make clear that there is no necessary opposition between the principles of self-responsibility and responsibility for the other. Tension between these principles transpires insofar as self-responsibility is treated as an end in itself. The problem here is that self-responsibility is regarded as first principle instead of a somewhat counterintuitive way of prioritising the demands of the other. To the extent that means displace ends in this way, then Indigenous welfare reform fosters indifference towards those who fall through the cracks.

Indigenous welfare reform as indifference

It is important not to be unduly cynical about similarities between governmental discourses of mutual obligation and claims on the part of Aboriginal activists and others regarding the need for greater autonomy within Indigenous communities. To do so would be to occlude the agency of Indigenous activists as participants the policy process. Nonetheless, an effort

to listen to the voices and choices of admittedly select Aboriginal 'spokespeople' is clearly not the only thing going on here. The approach to Indigenous welfare reform initiated by the former Howard Government further undermines the pursuit of self-determination and is problematically articulated with the rationality of assimilation.

While the Howard Government cherry-picked the elements of Aboriginal rights claims that converge with its approach to welfare reform, absent from this agenda was any assertion of Indigenous communities as bearers of native title rights (Lawrence & Gibson 2007, pp. 663-666). On the contrary, Pat Turner and Nicole Watson (2007) argue that fears about child sexual abuse have been mobilised as a 'Trojan horse' to empower the federal government to seize control of Indigenous townships and do away with the permit system.[2] Here the former Coalition government deployed the figure of the innocent child to justify its seemingly unrelated ambition to replace the kinship-based collective ownership that distinguishes Indigenous land title with market-based, individual home ownership (Gregg 2007, p. 10; Turner & Watson 2007, p. 206).

The figure of the innocent child also provides the justification for the retrenchment of the Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP) scheme and implementation of income management. Taken together, these initiatives are intended to incorporate Aboriginal people and populations into mainstream employment and training opportunities and to ensure that benefits earmarked for children's welfare are spent accordingly (Hinkson 2007, pp. 4-5). This represents the issue of welfare dependency as a problem of self-responsibility rather than lack of resources. Indeed, ongoing government interventions embody techniques of assimilation, which enforce 'civilized' conduct through the rationing of income support payments and gradual integration into mainstream economic life (Lawrence & Gibson 2007, pp. 658, 666-7).

From a Levinasian perspective, however, the innocence of Aboriginal children in Australia is already undercut by the experience of 'belonging to a society that is indifferent, as a society, to those who fall through the cracks' (Bernasconi 2002, p. 9). That is, a society which seeks to assimilate Indigenous alterity, cultivate expressions of indifference towards traditional land and kinship attachments at both the institutional and cultural levels, and disregard scholarly evidence linking positive health outcomes with self-determination (Gregg 2007, p. 10; Turner & Watson 2007, p. 206). More generally, the rationality of assimilation reduces justice to the discourses of protection and mutual obligation outlined earlier. This opens the possibility of pitting the needs of Indigenous populations against the claims of non-indigenous citizens and requiring the former group to bargain for the provision of basic services that the latter group tends, for the most part, to take for granted (Lawrence & Gibson 2007, p. 661).

I contend that Levinas offers an alternative framework for citizenship rights. His conception of responsibility for the other provides an ethical direction to the politics of Indigenous welfare provision, not in the sense that it offers a blueprint for reform but insofar as it challenges the prevailing view that mutual obligation is the first principle of sociality. It also positively foregrounds the issue of sustaining Aboriginal alterity as a crucial element of citizenship. This interpretation of social rights is not a nostalgic invocation of so-called 'passive welfare'. Indeed, my readings of Pearson (2000) and Lawrence and Gibson (2007) indicate that prioritising the needs of the other involves responding to complex needs such as working with Indigenous communities to foster capacities for autonomy and self-responsibility in the context of a broader commitment to self-determination. The question is how this cultivation of capacities can be detached from its present reduction to the rationality of assimilation.

Here the new Labor government has taken a number of encouraging initial steps towards enhancing both the political and cultural situation of Aboriginal people in Australia. These

include a formal apology to members of the Stolen Generations, a commitment to replacing the National Indigenous Council with a representative body and reinstating the permit system and CDEP (Macklin 2008; Skelton 2008, p. 29).[3] The promise to reinstate the permit system is a way of responding to demands for self-determination and sustaining Aboriginal alterity to the extent that it acknowledges Indigenous Australians' distinct relationship and right to ancestral lands. Similarly, the government's commitment to CDEP recognises the specificity of Indigenous existence. In particular, the need for a complex approach to development that cannot simply be reduced to market economics and Aboriginal people's active cultural and environmental contributions through the arts and natural resource sustainability programs (Altman 2007). These measures are, however, likely to complicate the process of quarantining welfare benefits and it is as yet unclear how these potential barriers to implementation will be negotiated.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested that Levinas provides a useful framework with which to call into question and re-direct struggles over Aboriginal citizenship. Substantively, it is demonstrated that the rationality of assimilation continues to destroy Aboriginal alterity and foster indifference to Indigenous people and populations. The former Howard Government justified Indigenous welfare reform 'for the sake of the children' but tended to ignore the broader positive question of what kinds of futures Indigenous children are being protected for beyond assimilation into mainstream cultural and economic life. Levinas offers a possible direction for political thinking and activism wherein the issues of sustaining Aboriginal cultural alterity and listening to the voices of Indigenous Australians are foregrounded.

References

Altman, J 2007, 'In The Name of the Market?', *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, eds J Altman & M Hinkson, North Carlton, Arena Publications Association, pp. 307-321.

Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership 2007, *From a Hand Out to a Hand Up: Cape York Welfare Reform Project Design Recommendations*, Cairns.

Northern Territory Government, 2007, *Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse*, (C Martin, Chief Minister), Northern Territory Government, Darwin, -15 June, view 22 October 2007 <http://www.nt.gov.au/dcm/inquirysaac/>.

Bernasconi, R 1999, 'The Third Party. Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 76-87.

Bernasconi, R 2002, 'A Love that is Stronger than Death: Sacrifice in the Thought of Levinas, Heidegger, and Bloch', *Angelaki Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 9-16.

Clarke, J 2005, 'New Labour's Citizens: Activated, Empowered, Responsibilized, Abandoned?', *Critical Social Policy*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 447-463.

Northern Territory Emergency Response – Fact Sheet 14: What do the welfare Changes Mean? What is Income Management, The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, viewed 6 February 2008 <http://www.facsia.gov.au/nter/docs/factsheet_14.htm>

Gregg, M 2007, 'Normal Homes,' *M/C Journal*, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 1-19.

Hinkson, M 2007, 'Introduction: In the Name of the Child,' *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, eds J Altman & M Hinkson, Arena Publications Association, North Carlton, pp. 1-12.

Johns, M 2007, 'In Their Own Words: A National Emergency Media Timeline - Excerpts from First Eight Weeks', in *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, eds J Altman & M Hinkson, Arena Publications Association, North Carlton, pp. 325-335.

Lawrence, R & Gibson, C 2007, 'Obliging Indigenous Citizens? Shared Responsibility Agreements in Australian Aboriginal Communities', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4-5, pp. 650-671.

Levinas, E 1969, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh.

Levinas, E c1985, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh.

Levinas, E c1999, *Alterity and Transcendence*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Macklin, J (Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) 2008, *National Indigenous Council*, media release, 15 January, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Canberra, viewed 6 February 2008, <http://www.facs.gov.au/Internet/jennymacklin.nsf/print/nic_14jan08.htm>

Oksala, J 2005, *Foucault on Freedom*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

Pearson, N 2000, 'Passive Welfare and the Destruction of Indigenous Society in Australia', *Reforming the Australian Welfare State*, ed. P Saunders, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, pp. 136-155.

Ross, D 2007, 'Permits Protect,' in *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, eds J Altman & M Hinkson, Arena Publications Association, North Carlton, pp. 239-247.

Secomb, L 2007, *Philosophy and Love: From Plato to Popular Culture*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Skelton, R 2008, 'Now for the Hard Yakka', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Weekend Edition, 9-10 February.

Turner, P & Watson, N 2007, 'The Trojan Horse,' in *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, eds J Altman and M Hinkson, Arena Publications Association, North Carlton, pp. 205-212.

Yeatman, A 2004, 'Social Policy, Freedom and Individuality,' *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 63, no. 4, pp. 80-89.

Yeend, P & Dow, C 2007, Bill Digest: Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Welfare Payment Reform) Bill 2007, Department of Parliamentary Services, Parliament of Australia, no. 27, 2007–08, 13 August 2007

Notes

1. I would like to thank the ARC Cultural Research Network, the organisers of Sustaining Culture Conference at the University of South Australia and the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia for the ARC Cultural Research Network Award that provided the opportunity to present this paper. I am also grateful to participants whose critical responses inspired the reframing of some of the ideas in this paper and would especially like to thank Tanja Dreher, Ron Hoenig, Justine Lloyd and Stephen Muecke for feedback on the paper.
2. Facilitated and administered by the Central Land Council, on behalf of traditional owners, the permit system is a 'tool for allowing and negotiating third party access to Aboriginal lands and communities' (Ross 2007, p. 239).
3. The Stolen Generations refers to the children systematically removed from their families and communities and raised as wards of the state under the policy of assimilation.
   The National Indigenous Council was established by the Howard government—after the abolition of the representative Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)—to provide advice on Indigenous Affairs. Its membership consisted of fourteen Aboriginal people hand-picked by the former government (Lawrence & Gibson 2007).