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What is This?

When looking for anarchy, look to the state: Fantasies of regulation in forcing disorder within the Australian Indigenous estate

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Abstract

This article questions the foundational binary 'anarchy–bureaucracy' and the multiple articulations at play in the state's refraction of anarchic qualities onto Indigenous Australians. Launching from the Northern Territory Emergency Response of June 2007, in which the Australian government assumed direct control of 73 Aboriginal communities in the north of Australia, it asks why bureaucracy is considered the antonym of anarchy and not its synonym. In mobilizing accounts of anarchic Aboriginal depravity to authorize an ongoing bureau-professional presence in Indigenous worlds, links to other matters of interest, such as the state's dependence on mining revenues, let alone any account of the affective dimension of policy life, were removed from view. Reconsideration of the anarchy–state binary offers a lens to explore the emotional compulsions that are suppressed in the work of upholding the myth of a rational state and how this suppression further authorizes ongoing (anarchic) interventions into Indigenous worlds.

Keywords

Aboriginal, affect, anarchy, animism, Australia, bureaucracy, intervention, pleasure

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This article questions the opposition between notions of 'the state' as an assemblage of ordering or disciplining devices, and of 'anarchy' as the state's antonym, being that imagined space where state regulation is negated. It begins from the recognition that, when approached anthropologically, the state is not an anterior entity with anonymous sovereign authority, but is a human creation which is simultaneously peopled and the site of ongoing (emotional, political and administrative) struggles to align activities that in practice leak hither and thither. That is, 'the state' and its imagined location within rule-making bodies such as policy bureaus, is inhabited by sentient, encultured beings who think, feel, emote and make meaning within the worlds they are symbiotically shaped by and which they help reproduce – and which in denying its own humanness, creates conditions of policy anarchy (see also Lea, 2008).

   This has manifold consequences for the way in which policy is produced and, the focus here, for the distributional qualities of Indigenous life in regional and remote Australia. Using as example the infamous 'Intervention' of 2007, when the Australian federal government sent in the army to 73 Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, the vertiginous disorder of social policy bureaucracies is brought back into play to contest false preservation of the term 'anarchy' for non-state social relations. I seek to make sense of why the Intervention was conjured from the projected breakdown of intimate relationships among anarchic Indigenous people, beyond acknowledging the potency of images of child sexual abuse to invoke widespread moral outrage. What does such scandalizing reveal about social relations within policy; and how do such projections contribute to perceptions of the state as, to use the words of anthropologist Christos Lynteris (2011: 3), an 'external agentive totality whose power of sovereign decision lies radically and fundamentally outwith everyday life'? With these questions in mind, a more difficult plea is made for restoring a full sensorial dimension to social policy bureaucrats, in order that we might understand the compulsions that emotional states such as dullness and the pursuit of pleasure also engender in the development of social policy frameworks. So doing, I suggest that allegations of Indigenous anarchy are as much about the displacement of bureaucratic boredom, incompetence and anomie as they are about amending pathology; displacements which in turn engender disordered material ramifications on the ground as readily as anything Aborigines might come up with. Also obscured through such bureaucratic displacements is clear sight on state facilitation of capital accumulation through Indigenous dispossession; with Indigenous welfare the primary vehicle through which such accumulations are entitled and reconfigured into morality plays.

   It bears saying that a view of the state as facilitator of resource extraction, as source of material disorder, and as emotive site of human interactions is not a set of contradictions in need of theoretical realignment. These are multiple angles on tangled, always partial and concurrent material and symbolic phenomena. It is perfectly possible, in other words, for state effects to encompass complex military initiatives and dysfunctional public transport systems without one assemblage

being viewed as the smarter, more ideal foil against which lesser efforts are judged wanting. In both forms, the state 'spak-fills'[1] the social realignments required by capital. Typically it is the consequences of bureau-professional action, including subaltern resistances and their anarchic potential, which attracts the anthropologist's sympathy. Here, attention is gently redirected to the affective dimension of bureaucratic being-in-the-world, sidling us away from the portrait of 'doer' and 'done to' that anthropologists' advocacy tracts still tend to reify. Cueing from Don Kulick's (2006) provocative consideration of what attracts anthropologists to studies of the subaltern, in the same speculative vein I ask, what makes Indigenous social policy absorbing for its formulators? What are its pleasures and (secret) dysfunctions? I commence the analysis by briefly discussing how the Intervention can be situated as the latest chapter in the historical dynamics of state power under industrial capitalist development in marginal lands (see also Dombrowski, 2010; Povinelli, 2010). Yet I want to contest the insistent structuralist account which posits the state as an organized totality which, if it is irrational, is so as a result of 'unintended consequences'. Thus, in considering why dysfunctional intimacy authorizes greater spending on schooling, housing, health and police services alongside heightened welfare control, spatial policing, land annexation, alcohol and pornography restrictions, the article shifts from its initially Foucauldian emphasis on the disciplinary functions of interventionary measures to also explore how the state becomes engaging for its practitioners.

As an anthropologist of the culture of policy formations, I have noted elsewhere (Lea, 2008) that senior policy makers thrive on the emotional thrill of surfing crises and will convert even banal issues into heightened occasions for disorder. Here I draw attention to the pleasure and thrill of the Intervention, to its function as absorbing spectacle in exciting the passion of bureaucrats, and argue there is a pleasure in the anxiety of sleepless nights when a moral cause offers a greater rationale. The headiness is so addictive that bureau-professionals will happily join in the manufacture of anarchic social relations that must be amended as a reflex procedural action, leading, among other things, to absurdist policy expressions in Australia's northern frontier. In other words, what I have called the state's 'spak-filling' is neither conceptually well-wrought nor the result of any particular conspiracy.

The Intervention

According to official accounts, the Northern Territory National Emergency Response (NTNER) Act 2007 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007) was rushed into place by the Australian federal government with the objective of immediately improving Aboriginal social welfare. Like a military operation, it was given a colloquial name: 'the Intervention'. Under the Intervention, prescribed Aboriginal communities[2] have been subjected to a range of measures, including the compulsory five-year leasing of townships; mandatory child health checks; bans on the possession of X-rated pornography (including the introduction of audits of all

publicly funded computers to identify illegal pornographic material); and widespread alcohol restrictions (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007). Non-discretionary quarantining of welfare payments (which means 50 percent of social security payments now come in the form of food and clothing credits rather than cash), along with the removal of the permit system for entry onto Aboriginal Land, were also instituted. School principals were required to report unexplained student absenteeism, for the possible suspension of family support payments. A force of 600 soldiers and detachments from the Australian Defence Force (including Norforce, an Indigenous defence arm) were deployed to undertake compulsory health screens of children with a view to surfacing the hidden signs of sexual abuse,[3] and to provide logistical support for the construction of 18 new police stations together with transport and linguistic support services to other 'emergency' personnel (Australian Government Department of Defence, 2008).

To enable this targeted discrimination of income beneficiaries and entire communities to occur, the operation of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 was explicitly suspended and the protection of anti-discrimination law in the Northern Territory was removed. The professed aim was to control violence and child abuse by 'mainstreaming' Aboriginal people, by controlling their incomes, child rearing and homes. Coinciding with this upheaval, but separate from the Intervention, the Northern Territory government forced 53 Aboriginal Community Government Councils and Association Councils to amalgamate into 8 regional 'super shires' which, in a largely ignored move, simultaneously eradicated many remote area community jobs[4] and confiscated plant and assets from community organizations. The Australian government also installed Government Business Managers to be the 'single face of the Australian Government at the local community level – akin to an ambassador' (Australian National Audit Office, 2010: 37), a semantic move whose brilliant promise of rationalization and seamless services is belied by the fact that the federal government only has primary responsibility for funding contracts, not direct service delivery.[5]

The dramatic declaration of a national emergency in Northern Territory Indigenous communities in June 2007 was ostensibly in response to a report (Wild and Anderson, 2007), which declared 'rivers of grog [alcohol]', rampant child sexual abuse and organized paedophilia rings were destroying any capacity of Indigenous people to exercise normal function. Popularly known as the *Little Children are Sacred* report, it had been commissioned by the Northern Territory government one year earlier to investigate allegations of child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities that had become a national media scandal following revelations in May 2006 by Nanette Rogers, an experienced Crown Prosecutor in Alice Springs, who had also submitted her PhD thesis on child abuse and the failures of the criminal justice system (Rogers, 1999). Appearing on the Australian Broadcasting Commission's news and current affairs program, *Lateline*, in May 2006, Dr Rogers detailed sickening cases of children suffering at the hands of their drunken and depraved family members, providing graphic details of babies raped so badly that their genitals need surgical repair, and of how

any community protest muffled by an overwhelming malaise from relentless immersion in everyday brutality (Jones, 2006).

The public outcry from this confronting interview was immediate. News of the Crown Prosecutor's explicit account was replayed in all major broadsheets and an Intergovernmental Summit on Violence and Child Abuse in Indigenous Communities, involving ministers and senior officials from the Australian government and all States and Territories, was urgently convened. One month later, in June 2006, the Australian Government offered the State and Territory governments a package of funding worth AUD$130 million over four years. Conditional on the removal of any references to customary law from each jurisdiction's crimes act, the funding was to build police stations and police housing; provide drug and alcohol rehabilitation services; establish 'strike teams' to gather and share intelligence on Indigenous violence through the Australian federal police; conduct child health checks in remote communities; and establish a national truancy unit to monitor school attendance. The Northern Territory government took the opportunity at this time to additionally commission Rex Wild QC and Pat Anderson, an Indigenous woman renowned for her advocacy of Indigenous health, to separately inquire into the extent of Aboriginal child sexual abuse. It was upon receipt of the Anderson–Wild report that the Australian government took the extraordinary step of announcing that the abuse of children in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory constituted a national emergency for which urgent measures were demanded.

Creating neoliberal subjects?

The measures introduced by the federal government strengthened those proffered following the previous year's urgent Intergovernmental Summit and added new items – particularly around the resumption of land title as the funding price for such fripperies as sewerage services, safe drinking water and housing in select communities. The Intervention was immediately critiqued for being 'introduced with no advance consultation with indigenous leaders and without the preparation of broader public opinion' (Marsh, 2008: §4.3). But criticisms of its inherent paternalism in terms of overriding both Indigenous people and the regulatory apparatus of the Northern Territory government were easily fielded. 'We are dealing with children of the tenderest age who have been exposed to the most terrible abuse from the time of their birth, virtually,' then Prime Minister John Howard said. 'It is interventionist, it does push aside the role of the Territory to some degree – I accept that. But what matters more: the constitutional niceties or the care and protection of young children?' (cited in Karvelas, 2007).

Even so, critics remained dubious about the motivations of the Howard government in orchestrating the emergency response. After all, it had not shown much prior interest in Aboriginal abjection, but it did have an election on the way … and what better legitimating issue to perform a display of leadership over than the

protection of innocent children? As policy analyst Ian Marsh (2008: §4.3) describes it:

> as far back as 1999 a report entitled 'Violence in Indigenous Communities' had been prepared for the Department by Dr Paul Memmott. This was not released by the then minister (Vanstone) until 2001 . . .. In 2003, the indigenous leader Mick Dodson spoke forcefully at the National Press Club about violence, alcoholism and sexual abuse (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 June 2007, p. 35). Nothing happened. An inter-governmental summit on violence and child abuse was held in 2006. This pointed to the cost and blame shifting that characterized federal–territory and federal–state relations. Nothing happened again. There had thus been discussion of the problem of alcohol and sexual abuse at a technical level for at least eight years. The *Little Children are Sacred* report supervened. It was tabled in the Northern Territory legislature in June 2007. The federal government's response was announced in August 2007 as a national emergency, three months prior to the election.

The Intervention's release of hitherto unthinkable policy acts also caused some analysts to invoke Giorgio Agamben's work on states of exception (see for example, Lattas and Morris, 2010). However we do not need the Intervention to see the Australian nation carving a legal right to occupy by making an exception of Indigenous people. The legal fiction of *terra nullius* inscribed from the beginning Indigenous exclusion as a condition of inclusion (Povinelli, 2002; Wolfe 2006). In the enduring liminality that is a condition of Indigenous Australian citizenship, Aborigines are not only permanently defined by their exception but are tied to the politics of resource extraction – and to the genuine states of without-order (riots, homicides, brawls, marginality and placelessness) that such appropriations foment (see also Dombrowski, 2010). In among its newly legislated powers over Indigenous land, the Australian government had also re-warranted the Commonwealth's right to issue licences and leases to third parties, such as mining companies.

There is no question that, under the betterment guise of opening opportunities for house mortgages and private sector investment in 'city-like' businesses in remote towns (still not materialized, see Beadman, 2010: 11–14), the spectacle of the Intervention stole public attention from more pernicious land grabs. But while such 'Trojan horse' theories (cf. Turner and Watson, 2007) have considerable merit (there is ample evidence that the Intervention intensified pre-existing moves to annex what remains of the Aboriginal estate as an original form of primitive accumulation),[6] in suggesting a coherent master plan they also steal attention from the cultural domain of policy inhabitation. Such a functionalist account reinstates the myth of bureaucratic intentionality when a more complex and anarchic human endeavour needs to be countenanced. In other words, our all-too-human social forms have the full panoply of all-too-human characteristics. The language of emergency, suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act, deployment of the army and graphic polemic about sexual depravity gave the Intervention a heated

immediacy which critics immediately denounced as 'moral panic' (see Hinkson, 2010). But, as Ann Laura Stoler reminds us, such eruptions are too heady, distracting from the 'less dramatic durabilities of duress that imperial formations produce as ongoing, persistent features of their ontologies' (2008: 192). It is to the ordinariness of the extraordinary in everyday Indigenous life set against the ordinariness of engineered policy crises in the everyday of bureau-professional life that I now direct attention.

Endemic intervention

Stoler's redirection to the 'durabilities of distress' helps explain why, on the ground, the Intervention's impact was not as inflamed as its defenders and detractors alike dreamt it, but entered everyday Indigenous life with more whimper than bang.[7] The measures were differentially applied, haphazardly implemented, and the space between pronouncements and shifts on the ground remained great (as with the introduction of 'income management' or shop cards that neither improved nutrition nor reduced expenditure on tobacco and junk food; see Brimblecombe et al., 2010). It remains extremely difficult to track how much money has been dedicated to Northern Territory education, housing, police, health and other services, and with what effect, given the silences in the otherwise exhortatory public accounts. For instance, one has to sift through topic-specific reports of the Australian National Audit Office, and even then the discrete pieces refuse synoptic overview and are obfuscated further by continual program changes. One might discover, for instance, that of the AUD$225.3 million allocated for Government Business Managers (in order that government services to Indigenous people are rendered more efficient), $190.9 million, or 85 percent, was dedicated to professional salaries in that reporting year (Australian National Audit Office, 2010: 38); but not, say, the social costs of having drinkers congregate into camps on the outskirts of 'dry' communities with no shelter, toilets, water, food or police protection from violent affrays.

To say that the endemic confusions of government policy are not a source of daily panic for Indigenous people is not to argue that the plethora of policy changes have no impact. Indeed, with the latest policy changes, Indigenous nonplace, their marginalization, their state of exception as the condition of inclusion that is the remote Aboriginal assemblage, is bitterly affirmed. For instance, in the abuses and abandonments of policy, one of the more stealthy changes slipped in without fanfare, outside the fuss of *the* Intervention, was a new price tag on future federal funding to the Northern Territory government. The Northern Territory would receive more money for 'Aboriginal issues' (meaning money for white salaries and their related service infrastructure), provided outstations[8] were not given any future support. A token amount was made available for all outstation infrastructure and outstation clan groups were re-designated 'private property owners', a semantic move that means any development (for roads, sewerage, power, housing, first aid or new schooling) now falls to isolated residents. Government-funded

services are instead concentrated in 21 'Territory Growth Towns' which are meant to serve as 'hub' communities for people in surrounding country. In turn, traditional owners of these 21 Growth Towns had to relinquish their freehold tenure in order to receive the promised housing and infrastructure funding in the first instance, in some cases under the blackmailing threat of compulsory acquisition.[9] The Northern Territory government signed the budget deal and got its cascade of black dollars, while traditional owners have tortuously negotiated superficially better 'service packages' in exchange for tenure release.

Yet for those 'benefiting' from the designation 'Growth Town' under the Intervention, anarchic policy is materialized in disabled ramps built for a wheelchair-bound old lady which propels her into a swamp at the back of her house, 200 metres away from the road she is meant to be getting to; or in pipes that are not attached to effluent disposal systems (see also Lea and Pholeros, 2010). It is found in the use of glued laminated structural timber, intolerant of climate extremes and attractive to termites, for houses in the termite-rich and annually swamped community of Groote Eylandt; and in the provision of six house footings costing AUD$28 million that must be rehabilitated at great expense as government contractors ride off into the distance (author's field notes, 2010). The Aboriginal men, women and children I work with have to be told what the Intervention and changes to welfare are meant to represent, because for them nothing has really changed: they still have no houses, the school fails to confer usable skills, and the relentless pressure to find $50 for petrol so someone can start the communal vehicle and drive someone else for urgent dialysis, a court appearance or other competing imperatives, makes yelling on mobile phones in a flurry of coordination still their business of the day. Against these ubiquitous debacles, there are Indigenous leadership efforts to use bureaucratic techniques of documentation and review to extract order and accountability from shape-shifting public officials, which inverts the usual white/organized/future-oriented agent to black/anarchic/past-fixed subject binary. In the midst of all this, we might say, when looking for anarchy, look to the state.

But let's steer past the temptation to list the multiple infidelities of government policy as it corrodes Indigenous lifeworlds, to concentrate instead on the inhabited state; literally, the normative state of *being* the state, a somewhat neglected subject in anthropology in the absence of insider ethnographies of policy settings.[10] Elsewhere (Lea, 2005, 2008) I have written about the way interventionist thinking becomes interiorized to the point where the world of 'clients' – here Indigenous but any targeted group or individual – is viewed purely in terms of deficits ('needs'), pathologies ('disadvantages') and requirements for redress ('solutions'). This is an utterly sensual interiorization, to the point where the question 'What is to be done?' with its corollary 'to and/or about them' is irresistible and foundational. It is an animating compulsion. The affective world of bureau-professionals exceeds the earnest desire to amend and improve that bureau-professionals embody; as totalizing as this is. Imagining ways to interfere in the lives of others is more than the business of public authorities serving the interests of capital (Rose, 1993): it *is* their

inhabited world. The state is not only without borders, it is embodied. Beyond 'conduct of conduct' and governance of the self, for interveners (including many anthropologists) being the state *is* the self, a self-state which shapes desire and emotional investment, the visceral medium through which the myth of rational state enterprise is vivified (Hansen and Stepputat, 2001; cf. Taussig, 1997).

If we accept that the bureaucracy is peopled, that the state is not an entity but an assemblage sustained by (encultured) human relations, then it follows that it is a conceptual ordering which is not abstracted from feeling bodies but is conditioned as much by daily affect as by instrumentalist reason. This leads me to suggest that professionals assuage a suppressed desire for anarchic release by first projecting anarchy's character attributes onto the other, while fomenting dramatic social policies that create anarchy's regulation-provoking image among the must-be-governed.[11] This helps explain the on–off nature of national policy attention to Indigenous issues, and why it is simultaneously the subject of rancorous moral discord and yet still known through abstracted and distanced representations. We might explain this preference for knowing issues from a distance in structural terms as a function of regulation, whereby, in order to rule, empirical intimacy is ousted by normative, categorical knowledge (cf. Scott, 1998). But, as noted, this repeat turn to instrumental effects removes from view the question of how bureau-professionals ordinarily inhabit their everyday worlds – and with this displacement, a falsifying sense of a disembodied state operating as a coherent and even rational ordering device is reinstalled.

Aboriginal people are so inured to dealing with the cruddy pragmatics of life the way it has always been for the radically poor and black in Australia that additional impasses and obstacles are more-or-less experienced as 'same shit, different day'. Policy's anarchic material expressions constitute their quotidian world. The extraordinary is their ordinary (Lea, 2008: preface; Lea et al., 2011), dealt with through variations on shrugging shoulders, bouncing back, turning a blind eye, celebrating windfalls, laughing, story telling, fighting, drinking, maiming, nurturing and relating to each other (see also Cowlishaw, 2004, 2009). Sexual abuse may or may not be taking place on the epic scale that provided the ostensible justification for the Intervention; Indigenous lifeworlds continue regardless. To be sure, under the Intervention, there were more white people driving or flying into and out of communities to 'oversight' (curious term) programs; more white people living in communities in their isolated compounds; and more fantastic rumours about what the white people were really up to placed into circulation (Musharbash, 2010). Yet, simply put, the adrenaline charge from policy flurries is more visceral for bureaucrats than it ever is for the intended targets. Even Indigenous leaders dealt with the Intervention as simply more pronouncements to be decoded in drawn-out meetings with political intermediaries and public servants, a wearisome part-and-parcel of the working lot of community organizations navigating relentless reform processes.

As we shall see, a different kind of normativity describes the world of Australian social policy professionals. As a people, bureau-professionals need to get through the diary, manage the emails, be collegial, appear successful, seem 'on top of

things', be diligent in ordained ways while still managing domestic relationships, and so on and so forth. Habitually, they steer clear of items of work which seem the most difficult to get any closure on, or will deflect the items which challenge how they routinely do what they do. Responses to rampant sex abuse are channelled into documentary artefacts that have limited flexibility in wording or format. There are institutionally thickened processes that must be obeyed, which brings us, via a circuitous route, to consideration of the 'order without order' that the binary 'bureaucracy–anarchy' might be taken to represent. In what follows I will attempt to draw the threads together to explore how anarchic policy emerges from the most banal routines and what vicarious horror from a representational distance might be satisfying.

Policy anarchy and policy ennui

Moving beyond readily available theories of governmentality, what does the repeat creation of cultural anarchists in representations of Aboriginal people signify? Why is it that Indigenous people are routinely represented as people who have lost their cultural order and are utterly dysfunctional, when straightforward accounts of their circumstances using readily available epidemiological accounts of socio-economic disadvantage would easily justify remedial responses? Like the Roma,[12] Indigenous people in regional Australia are ever represented as people whose perverse return to conditions so 'ostensibly unsavoury, unhygienic, [and] "demanding"' (von Sturmer, 2009: §13) dictates some form of social correction; but, strictly speaking, such extremism is not really necessary for policy targeting. Certainly, the need to create an exception as a form of inclusion can be explained in Agambian terms, but there is also a more subtle dynamic, a more run-of-the-mill impulse. Lauren Berlant (2006) argues that the labour of producing life in the contemporary world is also a process of surviving in zones of compromised ordinariness. One way of understanding the Intervention is to see that usual bureau-professional motivations for Aboriginal remediation – epidemiological descriptors and the like – had become so tired that more repugnant grounds were needed to reignite a sense of urgency.

Call it policy fatigue. Where the briefing template, meeting ritual, political and budgetary cycles stay the same, week in, week out, year after year, the subject matter substitutes as the vitalizing stimulant. Spicing up the content from an abstracted distance, without duty of care for the consequences, is a bit like watching a violent film for sensory escape then reverting to domestic ordinariness. Saving children from being screwed – no individual in particular, for the victim never had specificity; it is a generic blight that interventionary policy is irradiating – is more animating than idle doodles on notepaper, a more prosaic outlet for the shiftlessness I am invoking. Conversely, the stream of irruptive moments that are managed within bureaucracies also indicate the everyday labour of being ordinary (see Sacks, 1984), of inuring oneself to the absurdisms of much institutional work. These are enacted in multiple guise, as sexual affairs, satirical wisecracks,

whistle-blowing or, more symbolically, in the repeat placement of human excrement on the floor of a council washroom in protest at staff cuts.[13]

As the brilliant HBO series *The Wire* (Simon, 2002) shows, people are ordinarily very normal in their everyday forms of compromise, proceduralism and petty corruption. The thing about intrusive and poorly conceptualized governance is how dull its operations are in bodily practice. Certain superficialities in problemization necessarily underpin policy formulation, which, in apparently reacting to problems 'out there', constructs these problems through institutional apperception (see also Bacchi, 2009). Refusing the full ethnographic realities of the 'problems' one has been selected to work on, or knowing those problems in accord with collectively endorsed framings, is a very ordinary, expected, even interpellated modality. Managers who are focused on reportable outcomes do not encourage intimate field knowledge to upset their acquittals against the same; and the few who determinedly attempt to inject some sense of ethnographic complexity into their work will be dismissed as naïve and unstrategic (Robertson, 1984). Bureau-professionals auto-animate their world through attraction to eruptive representations of Indigenous issues while avoiding fulsome release into Aboriginal lifeworlds. At an everyday level, this not only enables swivel chair remedy from a distance (Scott, 1998), but emotional satiation without unruly commitment. Constructs of Aboriginal pathology safely relieve the compromised ordinariness of middle-class professional existence and a sense of doing good without having to share worlds.

With this as backdrop, let's return to the provocation created by the stomach-churning depictions of teenage sodomy, baby rape and young girls being given up against their will for sex with drunken older men. To repeat the question: what did sordid tales of sexual depravity mobilize that proliferating accounts of overcrowding, poor amenities, shortened lives, endemic poverty and chronic disease in the Indigenous domain could not? I would argue it offered the equivalent of bureaucratic paradise: the promise of working on heady moral issues without having to radically change one's own life, on a politically contentious and career-promising topic and in a situation where the immanent prospect of policy failure is productive, for whatever outcomes emerge, greater bureau-professional involvement is assured.

While the changes for Indigenous people sit in the slow-burn category of inexplicable and permanently ongoing state interference, a thrilling avalanche was loaded onto organizational intermediaries. Government and non-government organizations alike had multiple new distractions, what with negotiating new funding agreements and amendments to administrative procedures; understanding new allocation systems; relaying information through their networks; rapid restructuring of departments and recruiting to new positions to manage the suite of changes; issuing press releases; and providing regular briefings on the progress of the reforms (or rather, on the difficulties of measuring the reforms without more resources for data warehouses and/or the difficulties of getting any progress given the logistical complexities) and so forth. Organizations (including universities) competed to capitalize on the massive injection of new funds across all expenditure headings, more money than ever before for schools, employment and

training programs, housing and infrastructure, store management regimes, child health programs, alcohol and other drug services, nurses, police, staff accommodation and transport vehicles, monitoring systems, databases, servers, evaluation and planning consultancies, training and employment services. And the people who chase money (another term we might use for bureau-professionals, academics included) were kept busy flying to meetings, literally in planes and metaphorically 'on the fly' (see Wedel, 2001). Crisis talks were held over and again, which, for those with career ambitions, provided the opportunity to display the stamina, sass and strategy of the good operator, working hard on the calamity of Indigenous affairs, a potent mix of moral assuagement and performative swagger (see also Jackall, 1988). It was burdensome, exciting and, being constantly in the national media, clearly the space to be in to 'make a difference' – that fruitfully vague and ever present ambition of social policy bureau-professionals.

Of course, this argument should be pursued from more angles than I am equipped for, including a Freudian approach, through which the dynamic being described here could also be seen as a form of obsessional neurosis.[14] It is a projection where repressed knowledge of one's own real anarchy, inefficiency, social ignorance, waste and technical incompetence emerges in the recurrent images of Aboriginal people, the 'clients', who are made to inhabit the bureaucracy's guilty secrets. The pleasure in projecting this guilt onto others (the sudden energizing rush into action) comes with a guilt that is endlessly confessed in terms of decrying the inadequacies of the workplace or the limits on resources and the more that needs to be done (through internal and externally produced reports, evaluations and autocritique), in turn fuelling the endless cycle of policy renewal that I have elsewhere called 'remedial circularity' (Lea, 2008: 13, 236). Concern for Indigenous issues operates as an eruptive interest that reaches boiling point under conditions of policy crisis before returning to the slow simmer of bureaucratic routine. Perversely, it is the adrenaline rush of the all-night policy fest to amend the latest crisis, when policy pronouncements are produced by select movers and shakers against the clock, creating policies which are then 'implemented' by technically shallow personnel, which foster the very conditions for policy anarchy that only more state interference can amend (Ferguson, 1990; Scott, 1998). State beneficence claims to meet an absence in Aboriginal people, but the lack might be sourced closer to home.

Notes

1. Spakfilla is a commercial ready-mixed filler made by Selleys. It is squeezed into gaps, cracks or holes in walls or ceilings to create the illusion, once painted, of a smooth finish.
2. 'Prescribed areas' included all land held under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976; roads, rivers, streams, estuaries or other areas on Aboriginal land; all Aboriginal community living areas (a form of freehold title issued to Aboriginal corporations by the Northern Territory government); all Aboriginal town camps declared by the federal Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs under the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007 (the NTNER Act); and any other area declared by the minister to be a prescribed area: over 600,000 square km in total, encompassing over 70 percent of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.
3. This was quickly amended to a broad child health check after sustained lobbying from health experts (aided and abetted by worried senior bureaucrats) who insisted, against the stubborn indifference of the then federal Minister for Health, that there was no reliable screening tool that would surface signs of endemic child sexual abuse. The data from the eventual generic survey efforts, conducted by professional volunteers with little prior knowledge of Indigenous health, simply confirmed well-known morbidity profiles (ear and dental disease in particular), and almost certainly under-estimated their incidence and prevalence (Professor P. Torzillo, Medical Director, Nganampa Health Services, personal communication, December 2010).
4. While at the time of the 2006 Census, nationally only about 1.4 percent of employed persons aged 15 years and over were working in 'local government administration', an average of a third of the local workforce was employed by local government in rural and remote areas of the Northern Territory (ABS, 2007), which gives some indication of the importance of rural and remote councils as local employment providers, particularly in communities and regions where suitable employment opportunities remain very limited. (I thank Thomas Michel for this information.)
5. The one major exception is Centrelink which, as Jon Altman points out (personal communication), is paradoxically very effective in getting welfare direct to individuals.
6. In 2006, for instance, the federal government direction significantly amended the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 ('the ALRA').
7. Of course, how people reacted differed from place to place, but see also anthropologist Yasmine Musharbash's observations of how people in the Northern Territory community Yuendumu, a designated town targeted for some of the more direct measures, spoke about the Intervention: they didn't. 'Warlpiri people hardly ever discuss the Intervention unless prompted, or unless some dramatic new policy is announced' (Musharbash, 2010: 219).
8. Also known as homelands, outstations refer to Aboriginal settlements established with federal funding in the 1970s, either on ancestral country or at least beyond sites historically established via the trade of missions, pastoral stations and mining camps.
9. Tangentyere Council was subjected to this threat over a prolonged period; others were blackmailed with the decree that there would be no new houses until they signed up.

One of the many contradictory aspects is that most agreements do not involved related lease payments, as the expectation is that Traditional Owners will operate from charitable impulses rather than as private property owners.

10. Policy critiques abound but ethnographies of bureaucratic settings conducted through participant-observation remain the exception and are more likely to be conducted outside anthropology. Even then, as Kulick (2006: 934) has noted, the social sciences have generic trouble acknowledging subjectivity in knowledge formations, let alone elements of fantasy, desire and pleasure.

11. This argument is receiving book-length treatment (Lea, in preparation), drawing on multi-sited ethnography which explores the question 'Can there be good social policy, or is it a contradiction in terms?'

12. And not only the Roma. As one reviewer points out, Australia is not alone in its deployments of this discursive strategy. Both recent political events in Greece and London and older riots in the inner cities in the United States (cf. Feldman, 1994) are described by various authorities as possessing anarchical qualities, the better to justify forms of state surveillance and militarization.

13. Council worker, personal communication, 16 September 2010.

14. I am grateful to Holly High for these suggestions and insights. High's work (2011) describes an apposite dynamic, whereby melancholia concerns appeasing a sense of guilt over resented obligations via grandiose claims about one's own solicitousness, capabilities and influence.

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