

Representing Marginalisation: Finding New Avenues for Economic and Social Intervention

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ABSTRACT

Across Australia urban renewal and regeneration programs, generally run through departments of housing, seek to redress economic and social marginalisation in the nation's most disadvantaged areas. From earlier programs that focussed primarily on the physical aspects of redevelopment, recent efforts are concerned with the economic and social challenges. With the shift in emphasis it is timely to reflect on the representation of marginalisation and disadvantage that characterises these programs, how this knowledge is produced and resultant avenues for intervention. In this paper we use discourse analysis of state government program documents to argue that areas are identified and stereotyped in such a way that they are singled out from the rest of the nation or state as highly dysfunctional areas that require renormalising. We argue that the representation of marginalisation thus further marginalises these areas. As a result the state is placed in the role of the expert who devises and implements intervention programs, while those who live in these areas are expected to voluntarily cooperate in the "treatment".

We ask might these areas be represented in very different terms thereby prompting very different types of interventions? For example, might residents be positioned as already active and expert practitioners of activities that hold the seeds for an improved future? What types of intervention might flow from such a representation? We explore these questions by drawing on research into the diversity of economic practices that exist within our so-called capitalist economy and we highlight how those in marginalised areas can be portrayed as economically active citizens, contributing in diverse ways to economic activities that produce direct social benefit. We elaborate how this representation results in policies and programs which recognise and build on the current economic activities and social contributions of those in marginalised areas.

INTRODUCTION

Across Australia urban renewal and regeneration programs, generally run through state departments of housing, seek to redress economic and social marginalisation in the nation's most disadvantaged areas. These programs differ from earlier programs that focussed primarily on the physical aspects of redevelopment; today, economic and social concerns are core. With this shift in emphasis it is timely to reflect on the representations of marginalisation and disadvantage in these programs, how the representations are produced, and the resultant avenues for intervention. In this paper we explore these issues by reviewing state government program documents and related academic studies.

We argue that government and research agencies set out to solve the problem of marginalisation and disadvantage, yet these efforts also contribute to the very problems they seek to address. This occurs in two main ways. First, these areas are identified as being exceptional and “other” from the rest of the nation or state. As a result the areas are stereotyped in terms of a list of characteristics that cohere into a homogenous picture of disadvantage. The result is that a well-established story emerges of deviant places—and people—that are distinct from other areas of the nation or state. This representation results in the familiar scenario of government bodies being positioned in the expert role of designing and delivering a range of betterment packages, while residents are expected to voluntarily cooperate in their “treatment”. We ask might these areas and people be represented in terms that prompt more enabling forms of intervention? For example, might residents be positioned as already active and expert practitioners of activities that hold the seeds for an improved future? What types of intervention would flow from such a representation?

REPRESENTING MARGINALISATION AND DISADVANTAGE

Annette Hastings (1998), from the University of Glasgow, highlights the importance of reflecting on the representation of disadvantage in government policies and programs. From within a social constructionist framework, she argues that discursive practices like policy making create the social reality they are ostensibly simply responding to (see also Bessant et al 2006). What are usually seen as social problems or issues are not ‘pre-existing “givens” waiting to be unearthed or discovered by policy makers’ (p. 194), but are brought into being by the policy process itself which describes, explains and prioritises certain aspects of the social world, while ignoring or discounting other factors. The elements of the social world that become the object of scrutiny are overdetermined by a vast array of social, cultural and historical processes and relations.

Hastings demonstrates her argument through an elegant and close reading of a pivotal document that has recently set the agenda for urban regeneration in Scotland, and arguably Britain – *New Life for Urban Scotland*. This document accounts for urban issues in terms of a growing underclass that originated during the industrial revolution with the ‘migration of uncontrolled people from the country to the cities and towns in search of employment’ (p. 200), and continues to transmit problems from generation to generation. The solutions that follow emphasise the role of active government intervention to reform ‘an undifferentiated “mob” which has contributed to its own problems’ (p. 208). By laying the blame for urban problems at the feet of those who are marginalised the role of other factors is ignored (such as changes in labour requirements or shifts in the urban housing market). Further by portraying the marginalised only as a problem other insights are silenced, such as the strong tradition of collective activism and mutual support, and ‘the potential of residents to shape their own future and the future of their communities’ (p. 208).

We build on Hastings’ work by focusing on program documents from three urban regeneration programs in Australia: *Community Renewal*, *Building Partnerships*, *Transforming Estates into*

Communities (New South Wales Department of Housing, 1999); *Community Renewal Program Guidelines*, *Community Renewal Information Paper* and *Community Renewal Program Guidelines, Community Renewal Information Paper* (Version 2) (Queensland Department of Housing, 1999a, 1999b); and *Neighbourhood Renewal: Growing Victoria Together* (Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2002). The three programs discussed in these documents are typical of the most recent developments in urban regeneration and renewal in Australia. They are housed within one state government department but use a “whole of government” approach to tackle social and economic concerns.¹

The first characteristic of the program documents is that they establish a binary hierarchy between the normal and abnormal, the mainstream and the deviant. Areas identified as abnormal and deviant then become the objects for policy and program intervention; while those areas identified as normal simply fade out of policy view. A series of macro-indicators are generally used to distinguish between the mainstream and the deviant—e.g. unemployment rate, percentage of low income households, Year 12 completion rates, percentage of sole parent households, levels of crime, rate of child protection notifications and levels of public housing. In Victoria, for instance, the ten areas selected for the neighbourhood renewal program are identified as having an official employment rate 43% higher than the rest of the state, 83% more unemployment benefit holders and crime rates that are 58% higher (Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2002, p. 5). The rest of the state is represented as the norm against which these ten areas are differentiated (see Figure 1). Indeed, in the Victorian document the discussion and accompanying graphs comparing levels of disadvantage in the selected areas with the rest of the state are followed by a map which foregrounds the problem areas against the uniform background of the remainder of the state (see Figure 2).²

The effect is to single these areas out as quite distinct from other parts of the state, to ‘exceptionalise’ them in the words of Nikolas Rose (1999b, p. 488). In the social exclusion language that permeates the documents what is distinct about these areas is that they are not integrated ‘socially and economically ... into broader community and economic networks and systems (Queensland Department of Housing, 1999a p. 4). In other words, these areas stand out as deviating from the norm, and the role of the renewal programs is to bring them into the social and economic fold—to renormalise them. Identifying and categorising certain areas as distinct from the rest of the state produces them as objects for policy intervention and remediation (and academic study and debate). This has implications for those who live in these areas. They are also constructed as exceptional, as characterised by economic deprivation and dependence, social disconnectedness and deviance, political inaction and apathy, and as therefore needing the intervention of formal government programs in order for their human potential to be fulfilled (Cruikshank, 1999, p. 40).

Alongside these government programs are various academic studies that similarly single out certain areas for special attention. Bill Randolph and Bruce Judd (2000, pp. 93-4), for example, point out that broader changes (like changes in patterns of employment and welfare policies) have been perhaps most sharply felt in local areas where there are high levels of public housing: ‘[t]he net impact of wider social and economic restructuring on many larger public housing estates has been to transform already stigmatised places into concentrations of disadvantage’ (p. 93). Tony Vinson (1999 & 2004) takes these general claims one step further with his methodologically sophisticated

¹ The discussion that follows focuses on the program documents in order to highlight the prevailing discourse of marginalisation. We do not intend specific criticism of these three programs; rather our aim is to use these documents to bring to light features of a discourse which largely shapes how we all know, understand and respond to marginalisation. We also acknowledge that other researchers have identified benefits that flow from these types of programs (e.g. Warr, 2005).

² Rose (1999a, p. 36) refers to this practice of mapping as an ‘inscription device’ through which ‘salient features are identified and non-salient features rendered invisible’.

research that provides a precise ranking of disadvantage and advantage by postcode. His “Top 30” most disadvantaged postcodes are then singled out for detailed analysis. In such academic studies certain geographic areas of the state are categorised as problematic and objectified for further academic study; other areas of the state are apparently without problems and simply not in need of academic scrutiny or government intervention.³

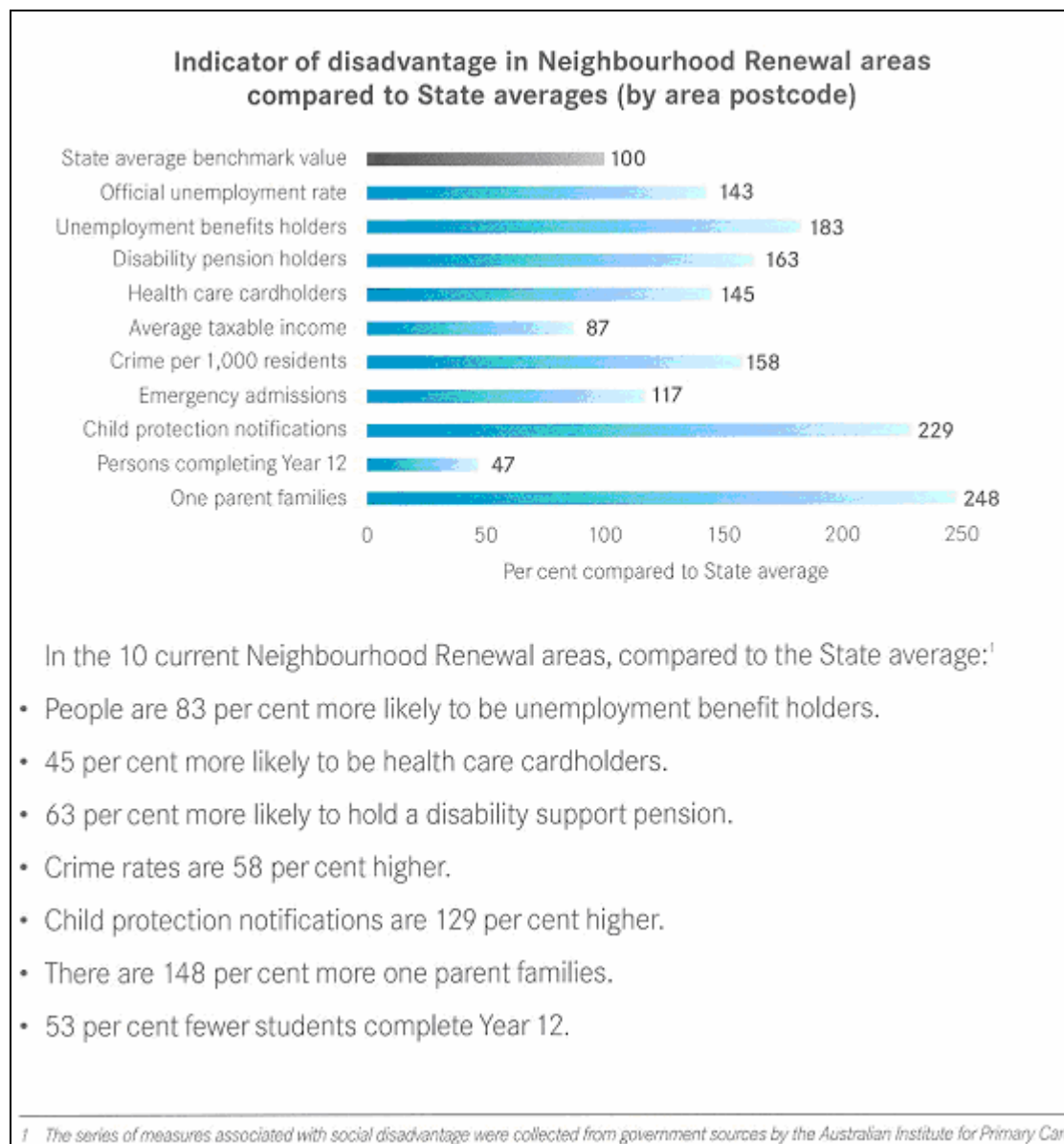


Figure 1 Identifying Problem Areas

Source: Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2002, p. 5

³ Here it is also worth noting the concerns of some researchers about the emphasis on the geography of disadvantage and the area-based programs that result. In her analysis of Los Angeles, Modarres (2001) argues that the geography of poverty is spread across the urban landscape, with just over half of people below the poverty living in areas with high poverty rates and only one third of people living in identified “poverty areas” being below the poverty line. Her analysis highlights that the reliance on area-based programs may be at the expense of disadvantaged people in other parts of the urban environment (see also Anderson 2001). Arvidson (2000) provides a disruptive reading of the Los Angeles urban landscape by mapping residents according to the class process of surplus labour production, appropriation and distribution. She produces a very different understanding of urban space highlighting how processes such as exploitation cut across the usual income based emphasis of most economic analyses.

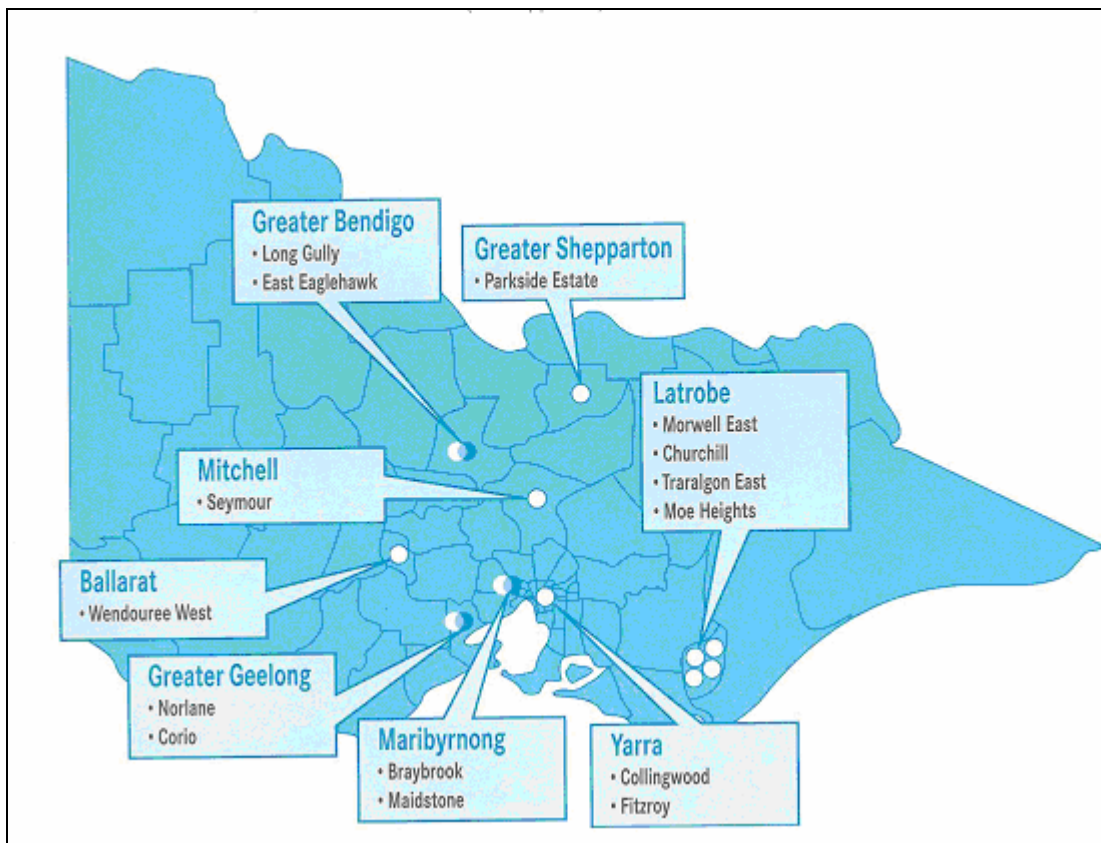


Figure 2 Mapping Problem Areas

Source: Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2002, p. 5

The binary between normal and deviant areas (and people) implies that only certain ways of explaining disadvantage are thinkable. One common approach is to blame those who are in the problem category. For example, in the neoliberal account poor policies of the past have produced a welfare mentality and cultural pathology which erodes people's ability and motivation to find a route out of disadvantage (e.g. Saunders and Tsumori, 2002). Another approach is to place the blame with processes external to the binary. For example, in the structural or political economic approach the economic process of globalisation and the political process of neoliberalism are the prime suspects producing disadvantage (e.g. Fincher & Saunders, 2001).

By identifying two distinct categories and problematising only one, it is difficult to imagine that perhaps the apparently neutral category might be implicated in the deviant category, that perhaps advantage produces disadvantage. As Lakshman Yapa (2002) has argued in relation to studies of poverty in the Third World:

by partitioning the world's people into two sectors—those who are poor and non-poor, we are prevented from seeing the role the non-poor play in creating conditions of material scarcity for the poor. (p. 36)

Similarly programs and studies on marginalisation in First World nations like Australia tend not to address the role played by social and economic advantage in creating disadvantage. One exception in the Australian context is the work of Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss (2005). They contend that in a world preoccupied by consumption and 'self-centred gratification' (p. 178) the sense of material deprivation felt by even the wealthiest has contributed to governments providing more and more welfare payments and tax concessions for the wealthy (e.g. rebates for private health cover, family tax benefits, and tax concessions for superannuation)(p. 139-142); while at the same time programs and services for those who face genuine deprivation are cut or threatened. Spending on the non-poor has been at the expense of the poor.

Identifying marginalised places as “other” and disconnected from the rest of the nation or state means that those who live there are homogenised into a stereotypical image of disadvantage. The picture is of bleak public housing areas populated by single parents, the unemployed and school drop-outs, whose lives are on a downward spiral of welfare dependence, poverty and crime (either as perpetrators or victims). As John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993) argue the various indicators of disadvantage all cohere into an all too familiar picture of needs, problems and deficiencies. Building on the efforts of nineteenth century reformers and nascent planners to transform conditions in urban slums, this is the focus of information that is regularly collected and disseminated by government agencies and analysed in academic studies (e.g. Vinson 1999 & 2004). And these types of images are repeated over and over, not just in credible government and academic materials but in shock-jock commentary and current affairs exposé.⁴ Other types of information that might provide a very different and varied picture of these areas are simply not readily available. For instance, what do we know of the social and economic health of these areas, of, for example, the innovative practices that people use to survive on low incomes, the informal social and neighbourhood networks that are prevalent, and people’s propensity to support and contribute to community activities. The portrait by Mark Peel (2003) of Inala, Mt Druitt and Broadmeadows offers some insights into the diversity of experiences of people in marginalised areas. And Lois Bryson and Ian Winter highlight how the values and personal characteristics of the unemployed in a marginalised area of Melbourne are no different from those who are employed (2002, p. 171). But these examples are the exception; on the whole little is known of the diverse and positive sides of life in marginalised areas. Yapa notes a similar process in the context of poverty programs in the Third World. The object of study, policy formulation, resource allocation and program intervention—the people of the Third World—are reduced to ‘the pitied “wretched of the earth”’; ‘[w]hatever else they may be—children, sisters, mothers, farmers, dancers, artists, care-givers, and nature-lovers—is banished into oblivion’ (2002, p. 43).

Exclusion and marginalisation are not just a social reality, but are created by the very programs meant to address the problems. Identifying areas as exceptional and deviating from the norm and then stereotyping them in a familiar picture of disadvantage are discursive manifestations of what is often a physical separation between disadvantaged areas and other parts of the urban environment (Hastings & Dean 2003, pp. 180-8). We only know these areas (and people) as “the other”, as distinct from the mainstream.

RESULTANT INTERVENTIONS

The portrayal of disadvantage and marginalisation gives rise to interventions that privilege the role of government and other experts. Those in disadvantaged areas are represented as unidimensional objects characterised by needs, problems and deficiencies. They are therefore seen as incapable of taking action to change their circumstances—this task falls to a range of experts. Yapa highlights a similar process in the context of the Third World poverty programs. The First World subject emerges as a rational, compassionate, moral agent—the embodiment of self that possesses the intellectual and the material resources to solve the poverty problem. The poor emerge as the needy other—the object of study and compassion—in need of development. (1996, p. 713)

In the community renewal programs of the First World, government is given star billing as the agent of change. In the NSW document this is couched in terms of a medical drama as government ‘act[s] rapidly to develop solutions’ and ‘[works] with the community to breathe life back into these

⁴ And in *The Lowest Rung*, Mark Peel (2003) cautions us to think about the effect of these portrayals on people who live in marginalised areas. He says, ‘[i]magine what the descriptions of disadvantage, those loaded and often vindictive words about fraud and helplessness and incapacity, strip away and then put in its place’ (p. 31).

estates', with the result that the patient is 'now showing remarkable recovery' (p. 4). In the Queensland material the tones are more muted, but government still takes centre stage, 'planning and delivering better outcomes for local areas suffering multiple disadvantages' and 'providing solutions on complex community issues' (Queensland Department of Housing, 1999b, p. 3). In the Victorian document the government is represented as the primary actor, for example, in the section on people's participation, government will hear, give opportunities to communities, establish, support, involve, set up, invest, improve and bring people together (2002, p. 11). There are few verbs associated with people who live in renewal areas: communities simply participate, which is then specified as planning, making decisions about priorities for action—but not *acting* in any substantial way—and evaluating success (see also Hastings, 1998, pp. 205-209).

The tone of the documents is that people in marginalised areas will be improved by participating in government programs. Writing about the social exclusion programs that are part of the Third Way agenda of Tony Blair's government in the UK, Nicolas Rose argues that the excluded are governed through 'a kind of moral rearmament', which occurs through responsible and dutiful participation in family, work and citizenship activities, thereby reintegrating and reattaching the marginalised to social and economic life (1999b, pp. 487-9). A similar tone is evident in the Australian programs. In Queensland community renewal areas have 'potential for improvement' (Queensland Department of Housing, 1999b, p. 4); while in Victoria areas are 'enthusiastic about turning the situation around' (Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2002, p. 7). No detail is provided about how an area's potential for improvement is determined, nor how levels of enthusiasm are established. Rather, having potential and being enthusiastic calls up Rose's image of responsible and dutiful citizens who recognise their deficiencies and willingly submit to the course of treatment offered by government. Thus the Queensland and Victorian documents are not so much describing actual areas and people, but calling into being the compliant and governable subject that is the target of (moral) renewal. This deficient subject in need of improvement contrasts with the moral citizen that inhabits the normalised parts of town and does not need managing or treating. Indeed, the patronising tone of the documents is starkly evident if we imagine government programs addressing the citizens of wealthy areas like Ascot, Double Bay or Toorak as having "potential for improvement" and being "enthusiastic about turning the situation around". Nevertheless we readily assume that those who live in marginalised areas will (and should) participate in treatment.

The programs provide two primary avenues for participation. Residents are first expected to demonstrate civic responsibility by participating in decision-making processes. This is emphasised in the documents, with each state establishing mechanisms through which people might have 'a real say in local issues' (Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2002, p. 11). But it is worth examining in some detail what participation in decision-making entails and the implications for the positioning of residents and government. In NSW, for example, involving residents in decision-making is identified as one of two key strategies (the other being to improve tenant management and allocation policies). Residents are, according to the document, 'skilled in knowing the problems and why they have occurred' and tenants input this information through advisory boards, workshops and meetings with government officers (New South Wales Department of Housing 1999, p. 4). Again, these areas and the people who live there are defined in terms of their problems. The civic duty of the responsible resident is to provide more detailed information about the problems. Residents are not represented as being skilled in knowing, for example, what the successes of their communities are, or the creative and socially and economically beneficial activities residents are involved in. Furthermore, the actual tasks of actively solving problems and meeting the needs of areas falls to government—'[a]n essential part of building a community is enabling residents to say what they need and involving them in *planning* for how services should be delivered' (p. 8, emphasis added). Government plays the crucial role of providing solutions and

services; residents are the recipients of these services⁵ (albeit that the responsible resident plays a limited participatory role providing additional input about the problems and needs). In the Victorian document resident participation is a central theme and at one point it is claimed that '[p]erhaps most importantly of all, residents are having a real say in shaping the future of their neighbourhoods' (p. 11). But the actual examples of resident participation in decision-making are relatively limited and involve, for example, selecting paint colours for refurbishing public housing (pp. 13 & 14).

The second avenue for participation is in the various employment and training programs. Here the image of the responsible and dutiful citizen cooperating in the process of "moral rearmament" is again present, with government 'lifting employment and training opportunities' in order '[t]o break the cycle of dependence' (Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2002, p. 15) (and later to 'break out of the cycle of dependency, drugs and crime' [p. 17]). It is worth noting the difference between this mention of the cycle of dependency and that found in neoliberal approaches. Neoliberal programs tend to address the cycle of dependency by relying on coercive measures like penalties to ensure compliance; whereas these programs, more aligned with "Third Wayism" and its concern with social and economic exclusion, tend to rely more on voluntary participation as the route to "morally rearm" the marginalised and excluded (see also Cruikshank, 1999, chapter 2, who provides a fascinating analysis of "self-help" programs for the poor from the mid to late nineteenth century).

Overall then the representation is of distinct areas and people defined in terms of a series of problems and challenges. The role of government is to resuscitate these places, with those who live there voluntarily cooperating in their treatment by initially providing additional information to help with the diagnosis, assist "experts" design an appropriate course of action, and then actively participate in the treatment program. The tenor of the documents is very much in tune with the social exclusion and Third Way approach in which '[t]hrough ethical reconstruction, the excluded citizen is to be re-attached to a virtuous community' (Rose, 1999b, p. 489).⁶

AN ALTERNATIVE REPRESENTATION

So far in this paper we have sought to unsettle familiar understandings of disadvantage, marginalisation and exclusion, showing how these "problems" are perpetuated through the representations employed in government programs and related academic studies. In saying this, we are not denying the lived materiality of economic and social hardship. Rather, we are arguing that through policy and research activities these experiences are framed only as problems, resulting in limited avenues for intervention. Other ways of understanding the experiences are foreclosed, and other more enabling ways of working with marginalised people and places are difficult to imagine. In this section we move from challenging the prevailing representations to presenting new representations that raise possibilities for different intervention pathways. We start by focussing on forms of economic participation, and in the conclusion we highlight the implications for forms of civic participation.

⁵ There is one example in the thirteen-page document of a resident developed project—a volunteer initiative to assist with odd-jobs (p. 11). But in the accompanying discussion, the project is put into the context of community development and capacity building projects that involve '[b]uilding platforms for residents to move from feeling unskilled to being well skilled' (p. 11). The document implies that residents lack skills and initiative, and therefore need government programs in order to build initiatives such as a volunteer odd-job service.

⁶ We have highlighted how this normative approach is prevalent in government programs, but it can also be found in academic material. For example Bill Randolph and Bruce Judd (2000, p. 103) conclude that '[a] thoroughly holistic approach will be a prerequisite for success in bringing disadvantaged households and communities back into the mainstream'. But what is the mainstream? Who gets to define the mainstream? Are all parts of the mainstream desirable? Does the mainstream include less desirable elements? Are there alternatives to the mainstream? (see also Bryson and Winter, 2002, p. 155-6).

In the government programs and most academic studies economic activity is equated with participation in paid work. Furthermore the absence of paid work—unemployment—is presented as perhaps the key cause of marginalisation and disadvantage. The UK's Social Exclusion Unit (located in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) claims that in the latter part of the twentieth century '[s]ome of the main causes of social exclusion got significantly worse, such as unemployment (particularly long-term unemployment), and the proportion of children growing up in workless and low-income households' (2004, p. 1). Thus a critical avenue for "reintegration" into society is through paid employment, with the Government 'plac[ing] particular emphasis on tackling the economic causes of social exclusion (especially worklessness and low income)' (p. 1).⁷ The Australian states also stress the importance of paid work, with unemployment highlighted as a central problem, and expanding employment opportunities featuring as a key program priority. The Victorian Government Department of Human Services, for example, includes lifting employment opportunities as one of its key objectives (2002, p. 3); while, the Queensland Department of Housing (1999a, p. 4) starts its list of funded activities with 'employment promotion'.

Not only is paid work seen as the primary mechanism for redressing marginalisation and disadvantage, it is also seen as the primary source of social value. Within a neo-liberal perspective citizenship rights extend only to those who fulfil their responsibility of participating in paid work. Those who do not are subject to harsh measures such as loss of their welfare benefit. Part of the justification for linking citizenship and employment comes from the notion that paid work is an essential part of achieving personhood. The US approach to welfarism is based on the belief that 'employment is positively good for individuals', that the workforce 'maintain[s] skills and contribut[es] to the development of positive social attitudes', and thus 'almost anything is better than welfare' (Whiteford, 2001, p. 53). The belief that paid employment is essential for human development also characterises the social exclusion approach of Australian state governments. The New South Wales Department of Housing, for example, claims that '[c]hronic unemployment is well recognised as a social problem and a health hazard ... [the Department] has a responsibility to assist [people] reach their full potential in the community. The best way to do this is through assisting them with training and employment opportunities' (1999, pp. 8-9). Linking personhood to paid work evokes Rose's claim that '[t]he wage, it seems, is a central mechanism for reattachment to the moral community, with its external responsibilities, its norms of comportment and its psychological concomitants of identity, stability, commitment and purpose' (1999b, 489). Thus those who are unemployed are represented as not only economically inactive but also deficient in the personhood and citizenship stakes.

A very different view of the potential of people in economically difficult circumstances is gained when we represent the economy as a site of diversity. Rather seeing the economy in its reduced form as including only those in paid employment working for small business or large capitalist companies, we propose a representation of the economy that includes the vast and diverse array of transactions, labour arrangements and types of enterprises that contribute to survival and wellbeing (Figure 3) (Cameron & Gibson-Graham, 2003; Community Economies Collective, 2001; Gibson-Graham, 2006). In most accounts of economic activity it is market transactions, waged labour and the production of goods and services in capitalist enterprises that are placed in the foreground as the valued drivers of the economy (the cells in the top row of Figure 3). This representation ignores the extent and sustaining contribution of the variety of other economic activities that have been documented by feminist economists, economic anthropologists, economic sociologists and informal sector analysts. The diverse economy framework draws attention to the important role that non-market transactions, unpaid labour and non-capitalist enterprises play in maintaining society. In many areas of the world where engagement in capitalist enterprise is minimal (such as the rural

⁷ Little (2002) claims that New Labour is obsessed with paid work 'as the gauge of social inclusion' (p. 133).

areas of most nations, but particularly those in the Third World; whole neighbourhoods of First World cities; and economies in crisis or transition such as Argentina or the former Soviet Union) communities survive largely through economic activities shown in the lower part of the diverse economy framework. Even in so-called ‘capitalist’ economies, as feminist and mainstream economists have shown, more than half the hours worked take place in the household or state sectors (Bowles & Edwards, 1993, p. 93). Furthermore, the value of goods and services produced by unpaid workers in households is equivalent to the value of goods and services transacted through the formal market (Ironmonger 1996).

TRANSACTIONS	LABOUR	ENTERPRISE
Market	Wage	Capitalist
Alternative Market Ethical “fair-trade” markets Local trading systems Alternative currencies Underground market Co-op exchange Barter Informal market	Alternative Paid Self-employed Cooperative Indentured Reciprocal labour In kind Work for welfare	Alternative Capitalist State enterprise Green capitalist Socially responsible firm
Non-Market Household flows Gift giving Indigenous exchange State allocations State appropriations Gleaning Hunting, fishing, gathering Theft, poaching	Unpaid Housework Family care Neighbourhood work Volunteer Self-provisioning labour Slave labour	Non-Capitalist Communal Independent Feudal Slave

Figure 3 The Diverse Economy⁸

The diverse economy framework offers a very different way of portraying those who are marginalised and excluded. In place of representing them as economically inactive, workless or idle simply because they are not employed in waged work, we can identify an array of other types of economic practices they might actively engage in—unpaid work around the house; volunteer work for organisations and community groups; and informal exchanges of labour for friends, families, neighbours and acquaintances.

⁸ The top row is the only one in the framework where the cells can be read as fitting together. In the rest of the table economic activities are not necessarily aligned across each row. For example, the timber products or childcare services produced by a waged worker in a family enterprise might be exchanged for other goods and services through a barter system.

In perhaps the most detailed study of its kind Colin Williams and Jan Windebank (2001a) examine what they call “self-help” in disadvantaged areas in the United Kingdom. They categorise self-help into three types:

- Self-provisioning, which includes all the unpaid work household members do for themselves and other household members, primarily housework, unpaid caring activities and do-it-yourself home maintenance and improvement;
- Community work, which includes all the unpaid work done for households by those outside the household, like extended family members, friends, neighbours, acquaintances. This also includes the work done by voluntary and community groups; and
- “Paid” informal exchange, which is work done for households outside the formal market and paid for in cash or in-kind. It excludes illegal goods and services (pp. 3-6).

Their study examines the extent to which these self-help activities (and paid formal employment) are used to undertake 44 common household tasks in disadvantaged suburbs of Sheffield and Southampton. They find that households in the disadvantaged lower-income suburbs regularly complete almost 21 of the 44 tasks, and that just over three-quarters of these tasks are performed through self-provisioning, almost ten per cent through community work and paid informal exchange, and fifteen percent through formal employment.⁹ This research highlights that people in disadvantaged areas are already “work active” carrying out many household tasks on a regular basis through unpaid and community work. A very different picture emerges from this research than those representations of economic inactivity that characterise many government programs and academic studies. Rather than the familiar representation of marginalised areas as distinguished by economic and social problems, Williams and Windebank provides a sense of the amount of economic integration and social connection that might also characterise these areas.

The diverse economy framework also enables us to think about the economic, social and community value of the work performed by people in marginalised areas. Feminist studies over the past decades have brought to our attention the essential contribution that unpaid housework and childcare make to the functioning of our society and economy. Socialist feminists, for example, have argued that the unpaid work of women in the reproductive sphere contributes to the reproduction of society on a daily and generational basis. Many women in marginalised areas participate in this indispensable social service just as women in more advantaged areas. Likewise unpaid voluntary work makes a considerable economic contribution and contributes to social and political vitality and connectedness (Lyons, 2001). Those in marginalised areas are just as likely as those from more advantaged areas to participate in unpaid voluntary and community work, as the McClure Interim Report on Welfare Reform in Australia found in a study of 65,000 income support beneficiaries (in Bessant et al, 2006, pp. 313-4).

Not only does unpaid work contribute to social and economic wellbeing, it also expands the stock of economic (and social) values and identities we have to draw on. Housework, childcare and other forms of unpaid volunteer and community work are built on values that are often very different from those of the paid workforce. In place of competitiveness, individualism and calculation, these unpaid and under-appreciated activities are associated with values like generosity, care and interdependence.¹⁰ These forms of work open out the range of economic activities, experiences and identities—from being only a paid economic subject working in a competitive, calculative environment to options that include being an unpaid care-giver, volunteer environmental worker, community gift-giver, family contributor, church volunteer and so on. Williams and Windebank’s

⁹ In affluent areas in the same cities Williams and Windebank find that a similar picture emerges with 24 of the 44 tasks being regularly completed. Just under three-quarters of these tasks are performed through self-provisioning, eleven per cent through community work and paid informal exchange, and seventeen percent through formal employment.

¹⁰ This is not to say that values usually associated with paid work like entrepreneurship and innovation are not also present in unpaid work activities, nor that values like generosity are absent from paid work situations.

(2001a) research particularly highlights the critical role that these expanded economic values and identities can play in marginalised areas. They examine what drives “paid” informal exchange, where payment is in-kind or in cash—but usually well below the market value for the product or service (pp. 123-7, see also 2001b). In disadvantaged areas there were two main drivers of informal exchange. Firstly people used informal exchange as a community building mechanism to develop and extend their social connections and networks. This rationale was particularly prevalent where exchange was between friends, neighbours or acquaintances. The second driver was redistribution, and this was particularly prevalent in exchange between relatives. For the consumer it was a way of paying a poorer relative (or friend or neighbour) to do a job that they would normally do themselves (or not do at all). For the supplier it was a way of helping out a relative (or friend or neighbour), but by involving some form or cash or in-kind payment it meant the help was not seen as charity nor as establishing an obligation to reciprocate the favour in the future.

Finally, the diverse economy framework also offers a different way of viewing the relationship between personhood and economic activity. Paid work features as the centrepiece of government programs because of its association with the achievement of personhood. Indeed, one of the concerns with unemployment is not just that it is linked to material poverty but to poverty of the spirit and soul. Clive Hamilton characterises this common view in the following terms: ‘the unemployed suffer most not from material deprivation but from the corrosive psychological impacts of exclusion from meaningful activity and the concomitant absence of time structure, idleness, impoverishment of social experience, and loss of social status’ (2003, p. 156). But, as Hamilton highlights, this ignores how other types of work can produce worthwhile forms of personhood. Unpaid housework and childcare, for example, can contribute to a sense of personhood and fulfilment based on giving and nurturing, and rewards such as emotional support, self-worth and pleasure in what has been achieved. ‘Purposeful work, rather than paid work ... provides the rewards most people crave’ (p. 157). Similarly, Williams and Windebank (2001a) argue that it is full-engagement in economic activities rather than full-employment in paid work that is central to a sense of wellbeing (and much more realistic in an economic context where full-employment is a goal that is unlikely to be achieved).¹¹ Focusing on paid work as the only viable option for marginalised areas means that the contribution of unpaid and voluntary economic activities of people in these areas to their sense of personhood continues to be effaced, and the potential to build on this type of work is undeveloped.

CONCLUSION

The alternative representation of economically active people in marginalised areas suggests that there is much more economic vitality and economic value in marginalised areas than is usually presumed. So how can we build policy interventions based on this different representation? How can government support the diversity of existing economic activities and help develop new activities? How might opportunities for civic participation in marginalised areas be expanded?

One development pathway drawing on the alternative representation is to harness the economic activities that people in marginalised areas are already engaged in as the basis for non-capitalist community and social enterprises. These enterprises might have an income-generating function. For example, in the marginalised Brisbane suburb of Eagleby, a group of residents with strong interpersonal skills received additional training as workshop facilitators, and have formed a not-for-profit enterprise through which they gain paid work as facilitators across the State. Social or community enterprises might also target mainstream market activities. A group of Eagleby women with a passion for cooking have formed a small enterprise offering catering services to the various

¹¹ Williams (2005) provides an excellent assessment of other reasons why full-employment is an undesirable goal, and a strong rationale for supporting the development of full-engagement activities.

groups who hire community buildings for meetings and functions. Interestingly government agencies are one group who regularly use the service (providing a very different route for government funds to flow into a community). The enterprises might also operate in the unpaid and non-market parts of the economy and focus on contributing to social and community wellbeing. In the Latrobe Valley towns of Morwell and Moe a band of unemployed volunteers helps out single parents and other marginalised groups with building and repair work, while another group runs a community workshop space for residents to make their own large outdoor Christmas decorations. These types of enterprises expand avenues for economic participation from training for a so-called real job to using existing skills working in a social enterprise, contributing to economic diversity in an area, and making social connections with others. Avenues for civic participation expand from choosing paint colours to making economic and ethical decisions about how a social enterprise operates—how surplus is to be produced and appropriated, how community generated surplus should be distributed, how the enterprise is to be governed, how finances managed and so on.

Governments and researchers can play a critical role in developing these types of enterprises by first shifting their attention away from the needs and problems of an area to working with community members to find out more about people's personal strengths, abilities and passions (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). As a second step governments and researchers can support people to build on their assets through assisting in the development of collective endeavours that make an economic and community contribution (for more on techniques and strategies for doing this see Cameron & Gibson, 2001, 2005a, 2005b; Gibson & Cameron, 2005). This type of approach means government has to move from the driver's seat and become a member of the sideline team supporting community members to establish, run, manage and "own" social and community enterprises. This requires a shift in roles so government workers and researchers are repositioned as 'specialized citizens' while community members are enrolled as 'local experts' (Fischer, 2000, pp. 41, 145). It also requires a shift in program emphasis, away from short-term intensive funding spurts to longer term commitments in which resources are offered in a variety of ways that include funding, training and strategic advice and support (see especially Cameron & Gibson 2005a; Gibson & Cameron, 2005). Such an approach broadens avenues for civic participation so that those who are more used to being on the receiving end of programs and services take ownership of enterprise development—so the 'done-to' become the 'doers' (Forester, 1999, p. 115).

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