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The etho-politics of community: middle class institutions, middle class manners, middle class solutions?

The great ideological struggle of the 20th Century was all about money. Would capitalism or communism triumph in the running of the economic system? This struggle has left mainstream politics drained of a framework and language to deal with the social issues of the new century. Public policy needs to emerge from what amounts to a civic conversation: political leaders engaging the public in a dialogue about moral values...governments need to...position civil society as an agent of moral dialogue, encouraging people to reassess and redefine their obligations to each other...This reflects what is known as a communitarian approach to politics.


In a substantial review article, Nikolas Rose (1999) canvasses the political, economic and ethical terrain marked out by the invention of a so-called Third Way political agenda in many of the Anglo-European democracies. This Third Way invests heavily, as Latham indicates, in the idea of community.

Rose (1999) argues that while the Third Way's project is in many respects hardly novel and, indeed, is lacking in inventiveness, it is distinctive in the sense that it is grounded in explicitly defined values. For example, British Prime Minister Tony Blair's articulation of New Labour's mission in the UK outlines a project that seeks to 'promote and reconcile four values which are essential to a just society which maximises the freedom and potential of all our people - equal worth, opportunity for all, responsibility and community' (cited in Rose 1999, p.470). The first two of these values are, for Rose, familiar elements in a 'left of centre' political project. The final two are distinctive but hardly original political ideals. In contemporary communitarian discourse these values suggest new forms of 'responsibilization' (Burchell 1996) between - as Rose (1999) suggests - 'those who have the power to exercise power and those who have an obligation to be its subjects. While the former must provide the conditions for the good life, the latter must deserve to inhabit it by building strong communities and exercising active responsible citizenship' (p.471).

Rose (1999) argues that the 'etho-politics' of communitarian discourse are suggestive of a search for new ways of 'acting upon the ethical formation and the ethical self management of individuals so as to promote their engagement in their collective destiny in the interests of economic advancement, civic stability, even justice and happiness' (p.475). He argues that this etho-politics can be identified via the 'moral vocabulary' of communitarianism and its invocation of ideals of ' partnerships, civil society, community, civility, responsibility, mutuality, obligations, voluntary endeavour, autonomy, initiative...' (Rose 1999, p.474). An 'etho-politics' attempts to 'act upon conduct by acting upon the forces thought to shape the values, beliefs, moralities that themselves are thought to determine the everyday mundane choices that human beings make as to how they lead their lives' (Rose 1999, pp.477-78). For Rose (1999) the etho-politics of community 'puts new questions into play about the kinds of people we are, the kinds of problems we
face, the kinds of relations of truth and power through which we are governed and through which we should govern ourselves' (p. 478).

In this paper I will draw on the work of Rose, and a number of other governmentality theorists, to argue that the governmentalisation of community (Foucault 1991) - the institutionalisation, rationalisation and abstraction of community - results in the ethopolitics of community assuming a decidedly middle class character. That is, when a range of state agencies, Quasi Autonomous Non Government Agencies (QUANGOs) and Non Government Agencies (NGOs) colonise community via the 'moral vocabulary' of communitarianism then we witness middle class institutions, with middle class manners/sensibilities offering a range of middle class solutions to the political, economic and social problems that impact most profoundly on the disadvantaged, the underserved, the poor, the working classes - the 'others' to these middle classes.

As powerful as Rose's analysis of the Third Way political agenda might be it ignores any class basis to this agenda, and fails to include a concern with class as part of its analysis (such a concern would be construed as too sociological within much of the governmentality literature). Class, as an analytical tool, has its limits: limits that have provoked much debate, but which have also led to its decline in the vocabulary of various middle class institutions (Joyce 1995). It should be acknowledged that the moral vocabulary of governmentised community also has particular religious, gendered, geographic and age dimensions to it - the intersection of these particular moral trajectories is a space worthy of further analysis. Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. My aim, instead, is to provoke further discussion that takes up and explores how class shapes the governmentalisation of community.

I will do this in a number of ways. First, I suggest that class, while unfashionable, remains central to shaping life choices, life chances and life courses. Second, I examine the ethical character of community from a governmental perspective. The focus is on Mark Latham's (2001a) description of 'Life Long Learning, Social Partnerships and Service Devolution', and 'Social Entrepreneurs' as key elements of a Third Way communitarianism. The analysis will locate the construction of these pillars of community within the contours of class based social relations. The purpose of this analysis is to reinsert a concern with class and its consequences into contemporary processes of political invention (Rose 1999). What sorts of solutions might emerge from these processes if they explicitly acknowledged the influence of class?

**Middle class manners, middle class institutions, middle class solutions?**

It is impossible to live in Australia without coming to realise that the different social classes have different sorts of jobs, live in different suburbs, go to different schools, get different incomes, speak in different ways, experience crucial difference in privilege and inequality, indeed live different lives (McGregor 1997, pp.2-3, original emphasis).

I want to begin with some initial thoughts on the speculative use of 'middle classness' in the title of this paper. Class is an unfashionable term: so much so that in many settings people can make the claim that Australia is a classless society. This claim is echoed in other places such as cool Britannia, where class is seen to be a part of an older, discredited discourse. Indeed, in 2002, a London-based property development firm, with its sights set on the development of a luxury housing complex in Chelsea, sought a High Court ruling that the working class no longer exists. Such a ruling would set aside a covenant placed on the potential development site by Earl Cadogan in 1929 which reserved this area of London for housing for the working classes (O'Farrell 2002; Burchill 2002; The Guardian 2002).

In many communitarian discourses there has been a shift from seeing class as a useful descriptor of collective relationships and forms of association. Instead there is a sense that a range of communities best describe appropriate and productive ways of thinking about human relationships and forms of association. In this latter view we all, at least potentially, stakeholders - in the economy, in communities, in a current project, in whatever. However, far from being irrelevant, class remains profoundly implicated in shaping the life-worlds of various populations in globalising, post-industrial capitalism.

Craig McGregor, in his book Class in Australia, points to some of the limitations of classless discourses, arguing that class remains fundamental to shaping life choices, life chances and life courses:

'Australia? Classless? It's a sour joke... As the billionaire and millionaire entrepreneurs of post-deregulation rip slickly through the financial system, and hip techno-graduates dine stylishly beneath the grape-shrouded trellises of Carlton and Paddington, and nest little kids in white collars and slick back hair lock themselves into their bank-tellers' cages, and generations of westies who drown beneath the poverty line, it seems obscene not to deal with class' (1997, p.4).
At the outset, I want to reinsert class as a central structuring element into any discussion of the governmentalisation of community: central to the ways in which communities are said to constitute preferred forms of relationships and association: and central also to understanding the roles played by an ascendant social grouping of new class professionals who populate and shape the range of institutions that seek to find in communities the solutions to any number of problems. Many of which emerge from, and are shaped by, relations that are often remote from, and hostile to, community as a place or as an idea (Cass & Brennan 2002; Hinkson 1992a, 1992b, 1993, 1995; Sharp 1992, 1993, 1995; Watts 1993, 1994).

Universities, for example, are middle class institutions. They have a continuing history of restricted entry, and of providing vocational and ethical education for the range of middle class professions (Bourdieu 1988). In short they play a major role in 'making up' (Rose & Miller 1992) the middle classes that imagine communities as responsible partners in the management of a range of formerly social issues (more on this later). So when community is named in terms of deficits or lacks - as contemporary concerns with capacity building would suggest - are we witness to middle class institutions, with middle class manners suggesting middle class solutions to a variety of problems? Solutions that rely heavily on often unstated assumptions that it is the deficits, the lacks, of the poor (deserving or not) that contribute to their situation (Fine 1994; Swadener & Lubeck 1995).

Community as a governable space

Indigenous communities. The gay and lesbian community. Ethnic communities. School communities. The Ipswich community. Although there is less often talk about, say, a Toorak community. Communities of all shapes and sorts. If the concept of class is potentially so slippery as to be thought redundant then the contemporary love affair with the idea of community faces the same risk.

Communitarian discourses have attracted a number of critiques. These often target the nostalgia that structures and accompanies the idealisation of community (Bauman 2001; Cass & Brennan 2002; Bryan 2001; Everingham 2001; Robin 2001). My purpose in this paper is to add another dimension or facet to these critiques: to contribute to analyses that focus on the governmentalisation of community, and the new middle class character that frames these processes of institutionalisation, rationalisation and abstraction. In this context it is worth considering a number of tensions that emerge from positions which lament the fact that people tend to 'bowl alone' in increasingly globalised settings (Putnam 2000). These tensions have a particular, but largely unacknowledged, class flavour to them.

Zygmunt Bauman (2001) suggests that in much of this nostalgic discussion, community: 'stands for the kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us - but which we would clearly wish to inhabit and which we hope to repossess' (p.3). In other words, a veritable paradise lost. Citing Richard Rorty, Bauman (2001) suggests that: 'having capitalized individually on their parent's collective and solidary battles, children of the generation who made it through the great Depression settled in affluent suburbia and: 'decided to pull up the drawbridge behind them' (p.50). Bauman (2001) refers here to the 'secession of the successful', exemplified in the 'gated', heavily surveilled, and 'secure' communities of the professional classes. A secession characterized by 'detachment, indifference, disengagement and indeed mental and moral exterritoriality' (p.50). It is from such
spaces that community, and the moral vocabulary that accompanies it, emerges as an abstraction. A rationalised space that is stripped of any contextual detail other than that which identifies the lacks that are deemed to characterise these governmentalised spaces. The 'other' of this secessionary movement is the stranger, the alien, the illegal, the queue jumper. This other is rarely welcomed into this community, and is most commonly perceived as posing risk or danger: a risk that, in many communitarian discourses, is imagined as being made manageable via any number of capacity building techniques.

From a governmentality perspective we can argue that community emerges as an 'imagined territory' (Rose 1996b). It promises to provide the spaces, relationships and techniques in which certain preferred ways of being might be produced, not by an easily demonised, monolithic, or monologic state, but by a wide range of NGOs and QUANGOs, under the stewardship of a so-called 'enabling state', in a multitude of settings, and in relation to a diversity of ends (Botsman & Latham 2001). These include the government of law and order, unemployment and the spatial impacts of globalising processes that see the emergence of new territories of government: e.g. 'action zones', 'regeneration zones', 'communities' etc., in which individuals and communities must take on the responsibilities for dealing with these issues (Blair 2001; Straw 2001).

The moral obligations of a communitarian politics

Today I want to set out our purpose and our programme to do more in a second term - how, on strong foundations, we can build a strong society... A society where work pays and idleness does not... A society with rules, and without prejudice. A society where we bind generations and communities not split them asunder. A society where parents take responsibility for their children, and where families are supported. A society where everyone has a chance to share in prosperity and gives back in return.


Political inventiveness, for Rose (1999), is suggestive of the 'kinds of problems that trouble political thought' - and the sorts of solutions that emerge on the horizons of our thoughts (p.468). I want to spend some time here identifying and analysing the horizons mapped out in a recent Australian-based imagining of the Third Way.

In the New Economy and the New Politics Mark Latham (2001a), leader of the Federal Labor Party, positions governments as 'facilitators' or 'enablers' of the development of social capital, as the catalyst for a so-called 'virtuous circle' of a 'strong society'; strong economy; strong state' (p.19). Here, and elsewhere, he outlines the characteristics of a Third Way political agenda. This agenda seeks to institutionalise communitarianism in the problems, practices and concerns of what can be called an 'advanced liberal' governmentality (Rose 1996a, 1996b). For Latham, the Third Way is a 'political cause for outsiders' that sets itself a number of goals:

- 'in the new economy, dispersing power to consumers, skilled workers and economic stakeholders'
- 'in the political system, dispersing power to the electorate through the politics of communitarianism and direct democracy'
- 'in civil society, dispersing power to communities of interest through service devolution and the work of social entrepreneurs' (p.34).

For Latham (2001a) an investment in a communitarian politics requires that governments 'position civil society as an agent of moral dialogue, encouraging people to reassess and redefine their obligations to each other' (p.24). At this stage I want to briefly examine Latham's key principles: 'Life Long Learning', 'Social Partnerships', 'Service Devolution', and 'Social Entrepreneurs'. This analysis points to the new middle class etho-politics that shapes the governmentalisation of community.

Life long learning

The idea, and the obligation, of life long learning is positioned as a primary objective of a Third Way agenda as it is, for Latham, the 'one public process dedicated to preparing people for the inevitability of change – developing new skills in the workplace, plus the habits of trust and tolerance in society'. The New Economy and the New Politics, in this sense, demands of its subjects a 'richness of lifelong learning and self improvement' (Latham 2001a, p.20).

A key element in this idea of 'learning beyond the classroom' – an element that exists alongside such ideas as civic focused 'learning circles', internet cafes in licensed clubs, and 'learning accounts' to overcome 'attitudinal resistance' among 'blue collar males' – is the primacy accorded to parents as educators (Latham 2001b, pp. 39-58). Continuing a governmental concern with the 'pedagogic family' (Donzelot 1979) Latham argues that a parent's fundamental responsibility is to be an 'effective educator' in the home. Skills in play activities, reading and homework assistance, are considered vital 'in breaking the cycle of long-term poverty', and dependence on welfare should be no excuse for poor parenting' (p.49).

In this obligation to life long learning
and communities in the image of the professional middle classes: an image comprised of an ensemble of behaviours and dispositions that promise the possibility of a certain type of ongoing ethical self-improvement. The governmentality literature argues that 'advanced liberal' governmentality attempts to govern through the behaviours and dispositions of individuals and communities, rather than society (Rose 1996a & b). Colin Gordon (1991) has argued that these governmentality have, as their object, a furthering of 'the game of enterprise as a pervasive style of conduct, diffusing the enterprise-form throughout the social fabric' (p.42). This mentality of government 'proposes that the whole ensemble of individual life' can be 'structured as the pursuit of a range of different enterprises' (p.42) - from the number of possible relations of oneself to oneself (as a reflexive, never-ending project of self improvement), through to the conduct of professional, family, work and community relations. These relations are 'all to be given the ethos and structure of the enterprise-form' (Gordon 1991, p.42).

It is not so much that the idea of lifelong learning is bad. Rather, it is the articulation of a moral obligation to continual self-problematisation and improvement, and the accompanying responsibilities that attach to individuals and communities as a consequence of actively participating (or not) in this 'game of enterprise' (Gordon 1991), that is so problematic. Particularly when, as is the case in the provision of income support for 'jobseekers' (the persons formerly known as the unemployed), 'active citizenship' attracts sanctions if it is not active enough (Dean 1995).

Social partnerships and service devolution

Latham (2001a) argues that in a networked society governments need to provide answers to questions such as: 'In tackling social problems, how many alliances and partners can we draw into the work of government?' Governments need to provoke and/or promote capacities, opportunities and imperatives to network and collaborate. Governments can produce these desirable collaborative partnerships by allocating funding in ways that 'leverage' organisations closer together (p.21).

The 'enabling state', argues Latham (2001a), can rebuild social capital in the transfer of power from 'bureaucracies to communities of interest'. New forms of responsibility emerge for these 'communities of interest' as the development, delivery and evaluation of certain education, health, housing, employment, family and disability services becomes a task to be managed by a range of NGOs and groups under the auspices of a 'clearing house' state (p.22).

Graeme Burchell (1996) has argued that the devolution to communities of formerly social areas of responsibility can be thought of as new forms of 'responsibilisation'. Here, individuals, groups and communities are 'encouraged freely and rationally, to conduct themselves' (p.29). However, the 'contractual implication' of these processes is that individuals and communities 'must assume active responsibility for these activities, both for carrying them out, and of course, for their outcomes' (p.29). These processes of 'responsibilization' also incite and encourage these communities of interest to 'conduct themselves in accordance with the appropriate (or approved) model of action' (p.29).

An example: the Salvation Army, as a third sector seller of employment services to Australia's Federal government, now has to breach those unemployed who fail to meet their obligations as active jobseekers. Breaching here involves a substantial loss of income support for unemployed persons for an extended period of time: a penalty incurred by the unemployed as a consequence of not meeting activity criteria within a framework of so-called mutual obligation (Macintyre 1999; Brennan & Cass 2002; Eardley 2002).

Some have argued that this obligation to breach is contradictory to the Salvo's mission (Dore & Harris, 2001). The moral vocabulary of 'activity', 'obligation' and 'responsibility' strips the experience of jobseeking of any cultural, social, geographical, economic or political context. Such contexts become abstractions reflecting, in part, the class-based experiences and values of those who develop and implement these policy frameworks.

Social entrepreneurs

For Latham (2001a) and others the character of the social entrepreneur is the self proclaimed 'big idea' in Third Way welfare policy. These networkers ideally 'combine the best of social practice, forging new connections and support between people, with the best of business practice, encouraging risk taking and creativity in poor neighbourhoods' (p.23). Social entrepreneurs, as brokers in social capital, are responsible for 'identifying small bursts of effort and achievement; linking these projects into new partnerships and alliances; facilitating a wider span of community success and self esteem' (pp.23-24).

As many in the community sector would testify, the idea of networked, small bursts of effort often translates into
massive investments in the risky business of compulsory competitive tendering, non-recurrent grant applications, and network building and maintenance. An investment that can result in high staff attrition rates, limited attention to core business, and a sense that social problems morph into project planning meetings, into evaluations, and into a focus on identifying 'deliverables' (even if these are short term and not sustainable). This is the present reality of a 'clearinghouse' state that acts as a purchaser of service development, delivery and evaluation from the agencies of civil society (Eardley 2002).

Social entrepreneurs are the 'successful', 'active' participants in a range of economic, education and social networks. In Latham's (2001a) view active participation is determined, not by government spending or market forces, but, rather, by 'self esteem', 'confidence' and a 'common purpose' in people's lives. According to Latham the 'core demand' in settings and neighbourhoods of poverty is to 'make the neighbourhood normal' (p.23).

This view of normality continues an historical trend whereby middle classness is the norm against which the poor are positioned as the 'other'. An other that is marked by deficit and or lack, not only of the material and economic resources necessary for a good life, but also by the ethical and moral predispositions and commitments that would help secure this good life. The work of Valerie Walkerdine (1997), and her examination of class relations within and between her suburban working class upbringing and the institutional spaces of the middle class University, provides a useful point of reference for some of these concerns.

In a number of spaces (books, articles, therapy) Walkerdine (1997) has attempted to give voice to various tensions she experiences in relation to being educated out of her English suburban working class childhood and up to a position of prestige and success within the academic middle (new) class. Walkerdine (1997) argues that her left intellectual practice needs to be 'understood' in the context of a central preoccupation and tension in her work as a new class academic: the place of the working class in left and feminist theory'. For Walkerdine, there is a strong sense in which she has been long 'smouldering about middle class views of the ordinary working people with whom I grew up' (pp.12-13).

Walkerdine (1997) begins to trace her anger in relation to much feminist and left constructions of the working classes via the work of British cultural studies theorists Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart. Walkerdine suggests both Williams and Hoggart identify some of the tensions associated with the experience of being 'educated out of the working class', and of moving up the social ladder. The climb up the ladder is a phenomenon which incites tensions within working class lifeworlds. This process, motivated by family concerns for a better life for rising generations, provides a strong impulse for working class children to be educated 'out of their culture and into a new one and of course, in so doing, rise above their parents and community' (Walkerdine 1997, p.13). Implicitly, and often quite explicitly, the social ladder, as metaphor, marks working class culture as wanting or lacking in relation to the middle class lifeworlds further up.

A current governmental concern with capacity building in individuals and communities 'at-risk' is reflective, in this sense, of a history of liberal governmentalities in which certain 'assumptions about the mind of the masses have been central to their regulation' (Walkerdine 1997, p.15). Diverse governmental projects, which take as their objects the mind of the working class, are structured, Walkerdine (1997) argues, by a rationality which positions 'middle classness' as 'normal', and 'working classness' as a 'deviant pathology' to be transformed where possible by 'correctional strategies that will make working class subjects more like their middle-class counterparts' (p.29). For Walkerdine (1997) these fictions have, historically, exhibited little 'interest in the way that working people actually survived and lived and coped during particular historical periods in particular places and circumstances'. Rather, what has been of central importance in these fictions are the 'discourses and practices of how they might become something else' (p.32).

The tensions provoked by Walkerdine's step up into new class intellectual spaces can be understood in ways other than as the idiosyncratic inadequacies of one individual getting above herself (see also Fine 1994; Swadener & Lubeck 1995). It might be more appropriate to see in such responses certain historical tensions generated by middle class rationalisations of, investments in, and assumptions about the masses. A common logic underpins these diverse accounts of the mind of the masses. These processes of intellectual knowledge production are fundamentally framed by a transformative logic. Within this logic there is a sense that working class lifeworlds are marked by a deficit or lack. The identification and construction of these lacks then becomes the impetus for transformative interventions into the life-worlds of the masses in order for
these deficits to be overcome – to make these neighbourhoods more normal.

The governmentalisation of community and a lack of political inventiveness: some closing remarks

The etho-politics of community displays a marked lack of inventiveness, and a narrowness of horizon in relation to many of the issues that confront and confound individuals, groups, localities, nations and the planet. This lack of imagination is most apparent in those rationalities that seek to responsibilize individuals and communities without adequately accounting for the relations of power that shape the different life chances, choices and courses of individuals and communities.

Given these concerns it is worth returning to Rose’s (1999) critique of the Third Way. He indicates a remembrance of an older, largely discredited discourse: a passage from the Communist Manifesto which suggests that certain sections of the ‘bourgeoisie is desirous of redressing social grievances, in order to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society. To this section belong economists, philanthropists, humanitarians, improvers of the condition of the working class, organisers of charity’, whose political objectives include: ‘Free trade: for the benefit of the working class...Prison reform: for the benefit of the working class...the bourgeois is a bourgeoisie: for the benefit of the working class’ (Marx & Engels 1968, pp. 58-59, cited in Rose 1999, p.470).

The governmentalisation of community witnesses the institutionalisation, rationalisation and abstraction of community (Foucault 1991). This governmentalisation establishes new vectors of responsibility that flow through spaces and places made known as communities. These processes of responsibilization seek to produce particular forms of ethical self-awareness and management in the subjects of community. It can be argued that in many important respects these processes assume the appearance of middle class institutions attempting to make up communities and subjects in their own image.

Political invention is an ongoing process and concern: a process that should involve looking back and forward. A key task might be to imagine such things as obligations, responsibilities, activity and entrepreneurship in ways that are different to those invented to date in a governmentalised communitarianism. These practices of invention would acknowledge that many of the processes that shape different life choices, chances and courses at the individual and local level are structured by global processes, and by some quite fundamental ‘human forces of greed and exploitation...complacency, prejudice and hypocrisy’ (Rose 1999, p.491). They would also acknowledge that the characteristics that constitute the figures of the entrepreneur, the stakeholder and the community are shaped fundamentally by the contours of a class divided society, even if we should continue to discuss the nature and consequences of such a society, and how these consequences might impact on our capacities for political imagination and inventiveness. Mark Latham’s rise to the position of Prime Minister in-waiting, and the possibilities this development has for energizing the continuing governmentalisation of community, suggests that such discussions are particularly critical for political inventiveness in Australia’s immediate, and medium term future.

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THE ETHNO-POLITICS OF COMMUNITY


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