The Meaningful Difference of 'Aboriginal Dysfunction' and the Neoliberal 'Mainstream'

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> Even if the observer attempts to view a social system from an ethically neutral vantage point, his decision concerning the functionality or dysfunctionality of a set of conditions for any individual or subgroup implies a definite value as to what constitutes 'the good life'. (Mayer Hacker 1951: 355)

Abstract

Once restricted to 'expert' medical and functionalist psycho-sociological terminology, 'dysfunctionality' seems to have known a surge of success in the last twenty years within common language to refer to perceived pathological or 'maladaptive' aspects of individual and social behaviour. Within the Australian context, ongoing public debates on socio-economic and health issues within Australian Indigenous communities now commonly feature the term 'dysfunctional' to qualify the various 'problems' which are popularly assumed to be prevalent within Indigenous communities, from high rates of unemployment to alcohol abuse and 'domestic violence'. Public commentators' recourse to the term has been particularly frequent around the time of the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention. Public outcry about the 'dysfunction' of Aboriginal communities has operated as justification for state intervention, with a strong emphasis on disciplining and reforming behaviours and inducing individual 'responsibilities' (this is particularly evident in the restriction of individual welfare income spending to the purchase of food and other essential goods – see Lattas & Morris 2010a, 2010b). While arguments on which it was based occupied a growing place in public debate since the 1990s (see Austin-Broos 2011), the Intervention can be viewed as a landmark in the gaining in public authority of a particular type of discourse about remote Indigenous communities, a discourse which portrays these communities as maladaptive 'exceptions' to the 'mainstream' (depictions of Aboriginal communities in terms of pathology, however, are not limited to 'classical' remote Northern Territory communities, as we shall see with the case of Palm Island, located in North East Queensland). Such contrastive discourse is not strictly limited to, but particularly evident in, neoliberal accounts of contemporary conditions within Indigenous communities.

In an article about the Northern Territory Intervention, Andrew Lattas and Barry Morris write that 'today, the vision of humanity and social order on which the Intervention is grounded is the empty analytical concept of "dysfunctionality". Like the Durkheimian concept of anomie, dysfunctionality posits an absence of moral governance as the source of suicide, domestic violence, murder, alcohol and drug abuse rather than explaining their causes. Dysfunctionality posits a moral vacuum that needs to be filled by government and the solutions of practical public intellectuals who today rationalise neoliberal forms of governmentality by presenting them as grounded in social science' (Lattas & Morris 2010b:

62). While I share Morris and Lattas' view of 'dysfunctionality' as a rather unsophisticated, shallow concept, it seems that rather than dismissing it as simply irrelevant, it could be useful to further examine its symptomatic role as a 'new' term in particular contemporary public discourses about Aboriginal communities. In this paper, I thus want to pay critical attention to what could be termed a 'dysfunctionality speech' characteristic of certain descriptions of Aboriginal communities, which dehistoricizes conditions of inequality in Aboriginal communities, points to the difference of the oppressed as the source of their own oppression, and emphasizes, in a contrastive manner, the worth of neoliberal values. The spectre of the dysfunctional other constitutes a counter-model which serves to celebrate such values, and 'the rationality of individual responsibility and fate' (Ong 2006: 2).

The Neoliberal Consensus Raising the Spectre of Aboriginal Dysfunction

'Dysfunctionality' has somehow made its entry in the Australianist anthropological literature of recent years with Peter Sutton's now notorious intervention on 'the politics of suffering' within the 'liberal' line of conduct towards Indigenous issues (with a paper, and then a book – Sutton 2001, 2009)[1]. Himself a strong supporter of, and adviser for the Northern Territory Intervention[2], Sutton makes extensive use of the 'dysfunction' terminology in his book, in a manner which usually assumes the term to be merely descriptive, not imbued with particular connotations, insisting on viewing despair and violence against women and children as what dominates everyday existence in most Aboriginal communities, the causes of which are not to be identified with 'external' forces, but ultimately with a dysfunctional Aboriginal culture. The public success of Sutton's book, and his increased public visibility around the time of the Intervention, reflects the gaining in authority of a particular type of public 'voicing' of Aboriginal 'problems', particularly visible in Sutton's stance. His could be described as that of the impatient and 'pragmatic' expert observer, who is finally telling the 'tough' truth about Aboriginal communities, a truth that other expert observers (among which other anthropologists) were unwilling to disclose, in fear of going against the grain of what Sutton calls the 'liberal consensus'. The 'liberal consensus', in Sutton's view, is what has characterized policies and attitudes towards Aboriginal people between the 1970s and the 1990s, its dominant assumptions remaining strongly in place but starting to be questioned and opposed during the 1990s (this actually corresponds with the coming into federal office of the neoconservative Howard government in 1996). Sutton's argument is that, with a naïve positive valuation of cultural difference, and a fear of discrediting it, the 'liberal consensus' has prevented 'Aboriginal suffering', in terms of violence against women and children, to become visible in public debate, instead focusing on collective oppression attributed to the enduring effects of colonial policies, and to the misrecognition of colonial history, of Aboriginal culture and disadvantage. In addressing these collective issues, 'liberals' have favoured self-determination policies and Aboriginal land rights, reconciliatory forms of recognition of colonial history, and reparative welfare policy measures. In Sutton's view, the

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[1] The publication of Peter Sutton's book in 2009 prompted heated discussions among anthropologists, especially on the Australian Anthropological Society mailing list, some defending Sutton against his critics for his 'courage' in voicing issues that other anthropologists had been unwilling to address. Earlier on, in reaction to Sutton's previous paper (Sutton 2001), Gillian Cowlishaw had notably critiqued his 'reproduction of the pathology model of Indigenous communities […] that condemns the people concerned to remain the silent recipients of the ministrations of government officials' (Cowlishaw 2003: 3), as well as his unsophisticated description of 'culture' as made of maladaptive 'survivances' (also see Lattas & Morris 2010).

[2] See for instance Australian Broadcasting Corporation – *Lateline*, 2007, 'Peter Sutton discusses the plans for Indigenous communities', Leigh Sales 25/06/2007, http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2007/s1961695.htm.

assumptions which underlined the 'political correctness' of the liberal consensus have been harmful: by abandoning the pre-liberal project of assimilation, they have allowed Aboriginal communities to become 'dysfunctional'. The new uninhibited speaker does not hesitate anymore to point to the maladaptive, if not destructive, surviving traits of 'traditional' Aboriginal culture (such as 'demand-sharing' or a supposed 'traditional' violence against women), and to point to the responsibilities of the 'sufferers' in harbouring the cycle of their own despair. At the same time as 'political correctness' is debunked, Aboriginal conditions are dehistoricized and depoliticized. Or, rather, a new historicity is being created, in which 'self-determination' policies, as well as liberal welfare policies addressing 'disadvantage', are designated as the failed attempts which decidedly belong to the past (whereas the effects of previous colonial policies are very much downplayed) and against which a 'practical' attitude (supposedly a-political) is proclaimed as the only way forward: a practical attitude which points at the responsibilities of Aboriginal individuals in reforming their own dysfunctional behaviours (see Lattas & Morris 2010a, 2010b).This stance is similar to that of other public commentators, policy advisers and intellectuals, which Diane Austin-Broos (2011) recently labelled as 'anti-separatists', for they advocate, with different nuances and ideological affinities, against the positive valuation of cultural difference as too often an excuse for the fostering of 'separate' and 'unequal' living conditions in remote Indigenous communities. Taken a step further, this critique takes the form, especially in its neoliberal version, of a new type of assimilationism, which conceives of Aboriginal difference, often in essentialized terms, and in its supposed maladaptive or pathological aspects, as adverse to a necessary adaptation to the 'mainstream'. The mainstream, within the neoliberal discourse, is construed primarily as a plain-level field, regulated by the market economy, in which free-choosing, free-willing and self-motivated individuals get equal chances to flourish. Aboriginal individuals must simply abandon their maladaptive cultural traits, or re-educate themselves, in order to participate, at last, in these equal opportunities.

Making extensive use of the 'dysfunction' terminology, Indigenous intellectual Noel Pearson has been particularly vocal in pointing since the late 1990s at the 'poison' of 'welfare dependency' and poor education in Indigenous communities, as symptoms of a structural racism perversely nurtured by self-determination policies, advocating instead for the integration of Indigenous communities into the 'real economy' by ways, notably, of developing local businesses, and for a cultural transformation from within Indigenous communities with a focus on 'responsibilities' (as opposed to a passive relationship with the State as the provider of welfare and the instigator of policy) (Pearson 2000).

More recently, Pearson has adopted a clearly neoliberal stance, in his celebration, notably, of Adam Smith's liberal philosophy as a model for a policy reform addressing Indigenous disadvantage, grounded in the values of 'self-interest, choice and private property', taking 'the individual as the principal actor in development' (rather than 'government'), and aiming for 'individuals to have "the capabilities to choose lives they have reason to value"' (here quoting Amartya Sen) (Pearson 2010). His argument rests on the idea that 'progressive' policy-makers have denied Indigenous people the right to be free-choosing individuals, not only by rendering them passive dependants from the state's welfare, by delusionally hoping for change based on government policies (whereas the motor for change is in Pearson's view the individual, and his will to change), but also by letting a 'communal' model of property exist within Indigenous societies: such a model, specific to 'traditional societies in Australia, as the world over with hunter gatherers', 'stands in contradiction to the imperatives of development'. The challenge is, for Indigenous people:

> To separate the domain of communalism from the domain of liberalism in indigenous Australian life. We must separate the domain of communalism in our heritage, cultures, languages and identities from the domain of liberalism in our lives. The demands of the market economy conform with the article of liberalism, and are indeed antithetical to communalism. There are countless examples of societies and peoples who continue to maintain communalist arrangements in one sphere of their lives, while maintaining a liberal sphere in their economic arrangements. The Jews and the Roman Catholics have found ways to reconcile communalist loyalties and preoccupations with liberal individualism. Indigenous Australians will have to more beyond the dominance of communalism, and relegate it to that sphere of life, to which it is most appropriate (*ibid.*).

What Pearson thus proposes is what he calls a new model of 'self-determination', which is 'the power to take responsibility […] to arrogate to oneself the power that for too long has been assumed by government' (Pearson 2011). This necessitates the 'travelling' of two 'roads' at once: first, 'to travel the Adam Smith road' ('all people who have ever developed have pursued the Adam Smith Road and it will be no different for our people'), and this implies taking in 'universal lessons about development, about the importance of individual agency and family responsibility and function that are the building blocks of successful communities' (*ibid.*). And second, to travel the 'road of cultural determination, our determination as a people to keep our identity and our traditions, our heritage, our languages' (*ibid.*). Pearson here adds that:

> A similar challenge faced the Australian people with regard to the sclerotic pre-1983 national economy. And the correct policy principle that we successfully managed to instil in all sections of society is that of competition. An analogous challenge lies ahead of us in relation to the question of indigenous responsibility. We must have a massive cultural change in the way in which government operates and unless everything we do is premised on the idea that indigenous individuals – and their families and their communities – take charge of their destinies and take responsibility for the power and the consequences of that power, then we will just see an ongoing cycle of anxiety about the fact indigenous Australians do not yet occupy a fair place in the country (*ibid.*).

Others throughout the 2000s, such as the late economist Helen Hughes, have also offered remedies to Aboriginal dysfunction grounded in neoliberal reform (see Austin-Broos 2011: 96-99). Member of the strongly neoliberal private think tank Centre for Independent Studies, and influential public commentator on the 'pathology' of remote Aboriginal communities generally, Hughes has been particularly insistent on denouncing the 'separatism' of self-determination policies, which have condemned 'those in remote and fringe communities to dysfunctional and disadvantaged lives' (Hughes 2005:2):

> Deprivation in remote communities, fringe settlements and ghettos does not result from a lack of federal, state and territory expenditures, but from the socialist remote communities' experiment that has been central to Australian separatist policies for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders for 30 years. The uneconomic remote homelands movement and the absence of private property rights under native title legislation are at the core of deprivation. In addition, separate education, separate public housing, separate healthcare, separate governance and separate law have deprived Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders of employment and decent incomes, making them welfare dependent and destroying their families and their communities. Substance abuse and violence, particularly against women and children, inevitably followed (*ibid.*: 1).

As Diane Austin-Broos notes (2011: 97), Hughes 'juxtaposed portraits of extreme pathology [see Hughes' comments about Palm Island below] with her proposals for policy change', which have been, in particular, the repeal of land rights and native title legislation, the mainstreaming of governance structures, and the implementation of mainstream education programs within Indigenous communities (*ibid.*: 99). As in the recent writings of Noel Pearson (who celebrated 'the [growing] impact of liberalism on indigenous Australian policy', which had efficiently brought 'to bear the intellectual weight of the Centre for Independent Studies in a policy zone that had hitherto been owned by progressives', as well as 'the contribution of The Australian [which] has matched the intellectual ballast provided by the CIS' – Pearson 2010), Hughes was particularly adamant in pointing at 'the absence of private property rights' as a key factor of dysfunction in Indigenous communities, where it 'means that income earners are expected to share their incomes rather than save and invest'(Hughes 2005: 8), and where 'communal' land owners 'cannot play an entrepreneurial role and focus on profits as owners and shareholders do' (*ibid.*: 12). With an evolutionist (and rather simplistic) outlook on the institution of private property rights, Hughes wrote (*ibid.*: 10):

> The institution of private property rights has been central to the development of productive economies and rising standards of living throughout the world. The process took millennia in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, where populations and per capita income growth barely increased while communal organisation was dominant, only growing by fractions of one percentage point per year for centuries as private property rights. Since World War II, however, there has been a remarkably rapid adoption of modern institutions centred on property rights, enforceable contracts and the rule of law so that technological and institutional advances have enabled societies to catch up to high living standards. Some of the poor countries of the 1950s have even surpassed the most advanced industrial countries to enjoy high 21st century living standards. The communist countries of Eastern Europe and China were left behind and are now struggling to emerge from their communist past. So are remote Indigenous communities.

> After years of shocking living standards on North American Indian communal reservations, some communities have gained large income by exercising monopoly communal rights over casinos. These have become, however, seriously dysfunctional communities dominated by racketeers and other criminals. Real success is dependent on significant participation by individuals in the mainstream economy.

> Yet, despite the overwhelmingly negative experience of communal ownership, in contrast to the positive results of land reforms and other measures to establish individual property rights, communist social organisation for Aborigines and Torres Strait islanders is still being advocated by academics and non-government organisations in Australia. In the Soviet Union state farms claimed 70 years of 'bad weather' to explain poor harvest after poor harvest. In China communes caused a disastrous loss of life and abysmal living standards for those who survived. Non-Indigenous Australians would not tolerate the communitarian policies that are being urged on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

In Hughes' view, the 'communism' of Indigenous communities (and of the late government policies directed at them) destructively separates them from the 'mainstream', understood as the well-functioning society of individuals with jobs and private property rights whose lives are harmoniously driven by the incentives of the market economy. Within the mainstream, Hughes concedes, there are pockets of non-Indigenous poor communities, but their situation is different from that of Indigenous communities:

> Non-Indigenous welfare ghettos exhibit the same dysfunctional family and civic characteristics with high substance abuse, violence and crime and low workforce participation as Indigenous welfare communities. But in non-Indigenous welfare communities the impact of welfare is mitigated by proximity to working Australians with decent housing and access to consumer goods and leisure. Some welfare victims see the benefits of working and get jobs (*ibid.*: 7).

With this comparison, Hughes highlights her view of a particular 'egalitarian individualism' (Kapferer 1988) which is grounded in neoliberal values. The neoliberal market economy is not premised on the reproduction of highly unequal power relations and the economic exploitation of an underclass: in Hughes's view, participation in the market economy by means of employment is, by nature, premised on equality, it is what allows individuals to equally share in the benefits of the market. The dysfunction lies outside of the system, in those 'pockets' of un-individualised 'communes' whose values are adverse to it, and thus who cannot integrate: although 'non-Indigenous welfare ghettos' are affected by these ills, Indigenous communities epitomize them, not only because they are physically 'remote', but because their values are even further removed from that of the mainstream.

'Dysfunctionality Speech': The Case of Palm Island

I will now take a look at the use of the term 'dysfunctionality' in reference to Palm Island, an Aboriginal community of about 3000 people located in North-East Queensland. The term frequently features in newspaper articles and public commentators'- including politicians' - descriptions of the community, commonly perceived as epitomizing an ensemble of 'problems' deemed characteristic of most, if not all, Aboriginal communities, such as unemployment, 'welfare dependency' and alcohol abuse. It is thus almost exclusively in reference to 'problems' that Palm Island makes an appearance in the mainstream media[3], and especially at times of 'crisis', when such issues become 'newsworthy' on a national scale[4]. It was particularly the case in the aftermath of the highly mediatised events which took place in November 2004 on the island, namely, the death from major injuries of Aboriginal man Cameron Doomadgee in police custody, followed by a 'riot' during which the police station was set on fire. In many media accounts, Palm Island was subsequently portrayed as a typical 'dysfunctional' community, this dysfunction being often brandished as the underlying 'true' cause of the 'riot' (rather than the death in custody itself, the lack of responsibility and capacity for dialogue demonstrated by the police, and the fact that arresting police officer Chris Hurley - who was judged and acquitted in Townsville in 2007 – was first interviewed by one of his friends, known to many Palm Islanders for having previously worked at the Palm Island police station)[5]. Amid tensions between the community and its council and the Queensland government and police, a number of political figures also publicly labelled the community dysfunctional, lacking the needed 'leadership' and where 'few people have any sense of social obligation'[6].

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[3] Note this is in contrast, for instance, with Aboriginal news platforms, such as the Koori Mail, which relays other types of information about the community, such as important social events and celebrations, council elections, land use agreements, etc.

[4] References to various 'problems' on Palm Island otherwise make a more mundane and frequent appearance in the local *Townsville Bulletin*.

[5] On these events and their aftermaths, see Hooper 2008; Glowczewski 2008; Waters 2008; Watson 2010; Garond 2012a, 2012b. On similar remarks about the reframing of causality in the media regarding the 'Brewarrina riots', see Morris 2005.

[6] In February 2005, the Queensland Premier Peter Beattie was on the island to inaugurate a newly built Police Citizen Youth Club complex, and present a 'five-point plan', with the reestablishment of 'law and

Among other examples, the use of the term by the politician Peter Lindsay, then Liberal member of the Australian House of Representatives (from 1996 to 2010) representing the Herbert Division (which comprises the Townsville area and Palm Island), is particularly telling. His reactions to the 2004 uprising on Palm Island were presented at the House of Representatives Parliamentary debates a few days after the event[7], and published on the internet shortly after (Lindsay 2004). His reaction was spurred by the 'riot', which, in the politician's view, 'underscore(d) a dysfunctional community', 'where alcoholism, domestic violence, drugs, health problems, unemployment, housing, sense of self worth and literacy standards may be the worst in the country'. Here I quote extracts of his intervention which, while not necessarily demonstrative of a very sophisticated kind of analysis, is nonetheless revealing of some of the most typical aspects of the 'dysfunctionality speech':

> The shocking events of last Friday on Palm Island in North Queensland underscore a dysfunctional community in disarray, a community that has to be helped. In all of the words that have been said and written about the riot on Palm Island, I have not been able to find any talk about the real solution that has to be faced. This is a community of 42 different tribes that has lost its cultural heritage and will continue to spiral downwards if Indigenous leaders and governments do not face this core problem. With 86 years of experience [Here Lindsay seems to refer to the establishment of Palm Island as a reserve in 1918], just how long is it going to take all Australians to conclude that Palm Island is not viable, and never will be, while it sits as an out of sight, out of mind, welfare-dependent community ? It will remain a community where alcoholism, domestic violence, drugs, health problems, unemployment, housing, sense of self-worth and literacy standards may be the worst in the country. The 42 tribes and their leaders on the island have had ample time to do something about the hopelessness that pervades the community. They have had more than enough money, yet nothing changes, year after year.

The solution is, in the politician's view, to favour what he calls an "integrationist model", which would allow islanders to live like other Aboriginal people do on the mainland: the latter, according to Lindsay, 'do not share the lack of self-esteem, the domestic violence, the lack of job opportunities, the lack of housing and poor education that typifies the Palm Island community'. The key to 'integration', thus, is to bring change in the land tenure system on the island, and allow for the land to be bought and sold, so that private enterprises can invest on the island and so that islanders can buy their own houses (rather than simply rent public housing)[8]. Although, in his view, change is partly a matter of government reform,

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order' and the rebuilding of the police station as highest priorities. He encountered resistance from the council, who refused to participate in the inauguration ceremony, and thus accept the Premier's offer to cancel the council's debt in exchange for the council's endorsing participation in inaugurating of the PCYC centre: the council viewed such pressure as highly inappropriate, considering the very heavy-handed police and government response which had immediately followed the 'riot' (with the sending of tactical response forces and the arrest of almost 30 people on the island), and while the first coronial inquest into the death in custody (the first in a series of three) was only about to start . In response, the Premier labelled the Palm Island council 'dysfunctional', lacking the needed leadership (*Green Left Weekly*, March 2, 2005). In March 2005, the then Queensland Police Minister Judy Spence spoke of Palm Island in a similar fashion in her opening address to an international police commissioner conference: 'In many ways, it would be described as a dysfunctional community which is lacking in leadership, where few people have any sense of social obligation' (*The Age*, March 14, 2005).

[7] See House of Representatives Parliamentary debates – Grievance debate: Indigenous Affairs: Palm Island, Monday 29th November 2004: http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/2004-11-29/0127/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf

[8] Since then, the Palm Island shire council has signed (in 2007) a 'Partnership agreement' with the federal government, which included, among other measures, the implementation of 'new tenancy agreements' for

'governments can only do so much - in the end the community needs to do a lot more'. Communities and their individual members are designated as responsible for their own disaggregated state, and 'government' is seen as allowing dysfunctionality to develop, especially by giving 'hand-outs'. The solution does not reside in the provision of improved public services and policies: basically, 'real' change is a matter of a change in attitude on the part of the community, a will to adopt a 'mainland', or 'mainstream' model of economy, and hence to 'integrate':

> The coalition government [i.e. the federal government led by Liberal Prime Minister John Howard at the time] believe Indigenous Australians, wherever they live, should have the same opportunities as other Australians to make informed choices about their lives, to realise their full potential in whatever they choose to do and to take responsibility for managing their own affairs. In that sense, we will spend thousands of millions of dollars in the coming financial year on Indigenous specific programs. While much has been achieved, Australians all want better results. We can get better results. I encourage the Palm Island community to think deeply about a new land tenure model which will see an integration into mainstream Australia and stop the terrible dysfunctional community that currently exists 70 kilometres north-west of Townsville[9].

In a similar vein, the late Helen Hughes wrote in early 2007 about 'the policies which have led to an island of tropical beauty off the coast of one of the richest countries in the world becoming an almost unimaginable slum'[10]. As in Lindsay's comment, stress is on the development of private enterprise and the introduction of private home ownership, the 'private property rights that enable other Australians to help themselves':

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new house tenants under which tenants (evincible in case of breach) 'are required to pay the maximum rent level for their dwelling plus 10% as a risk factor', and are eligible for a 'Pride of Place' program which includes funding for home improvement and renovation. It also included measures to facilitate access to home loans for private home and land ownership on vacant lots, and other provisions regarding changes in the land tenure system to provide for private home ownership and leases of land, including for commercial purposes (see http://www.atns.net.au/agreement.asp?EntityID=4188. An Indigenous Land Use Agreement has been subsequently signed in 2011(see http://www.atns.net.au/agreement.asp?EntityID=5481).

[9] In 2006, Peter Lindsay reiterated his comments about Palm Island, suggesting that if the 'hopeless' situation did not improve on the island, the community should be 'shut down': 'If the Indigenous leaders are not prepared to change the hopeless conditions that the community currently live in, then perhaps it's time to move them all to the mainland and integrate into mainstream Australia' (ABC news online, 6th January 2006).

[10] Although Hughes' commenting about Palm Island was an occasion to emphasize her position on the dysfunctionality of Indigenous communities and neoliberal remedies to dysfunction amid intense public debate preceding the NT Intervention, she also specifically alludes to the 2004 events on Palm Island, which at the time were again making headlines: the Queensland Director of Public Prosecution in late 2006 had stated that policeman Chris Hurley was not to stand trial, on the basis of insufficient evidence, countering the conclusions of the previous coronial inquest which had designated Chris Hurley as responsible for the injuries causing the death of Cameron Doomadgee. The DPP decision prompted a series of public protests in several major Australian cities, and was later overturned with the nomination of an independent judge, who found sufficient evidence existed for Hurley to stand trial. Hughes' comments about the death mostly refer to the fact that Cameron Doomadgee was on welfare pension and had been drunk at the time of his arrest: 'Typically some 300 non-indigenous administrators, policemen, teachers, nurses and others perform "services" such as rounding up drunks and treating them in hospital when they injure themselves or get hurt by other drunks. There are only a handful of indigenous jobs […] So after a spot of fishing early in the morning of Friday, November 12, 2004, Mulrunji, together with most other Palm Island men, cashed his welfare cheque at the Post Office so that he could start drinking. A little later, already inebriated, he made a rude comment to a policeman arresting blokes mixed up in a "domestic", was arrested and on arrival at the police station, according to the coronial inquiry, took a swipe at a policeman and later died'.

> Palm Island is a typical victim of the apartheid-like policies that have denied Aborigines mainstream Australian lives since the 1970s. Any group subjected to the same policies would become dysfunctional [...] Palm Island has to have an economy in which people can work and run businesses. This means the privatisation of land and private investment in job-creating enterprises instead of sham communal land rights which make Aborigines 'land rich and dirt poor'[11].

While emphasizing despair and mayhem in Aboriginal communities (and in Hughes' case it is unclear whether such knowledge is substantiated by any kind of actual visit to Palm Island), the 'dysfunctionality speech' either points to the victims (in Lindsay's case) or to 'self-determination' policies of the 1970s as the source of problems (in Hughes' case)[12]. Although vague references are made to earlier colonial eras, the impact of earlier colonial policies, notably in terms of the organized economic exploitation of Indigenous labour and the making of an Indigenous underclass (see Kidd 1997) are ignored or downplayed. This dehistoricization allows both commentators to ultimately make of an Aboriginal difference towards the 'mainstream' (translated in terms of 'communal rights' and passive 'welfare dependency') the target for change, where a new flow of economic liberalisation would at last enable Palm Islanders (in Lindsay and Hughes' words), to 'help themselves', 'take responsibility' and 'realise their full potential'. In doing so, they would finally integrate the 'mainstream', contrastively identified and celebrated as the flourishing site of neoliberal economy and values.

Policies of the 1970s are critiqued for their 'isolation' effect especially: that is, for allowing Aboriginal communities to remain distinct from the 'mainstream', and impinging on their chances to 'integrate'. The 'cultural' argument can here be used both ways: there is either a 'loss of traditional culture' (as in Lindsay's argument - with the contradictory assumption that there exists '42 distinct tribes' on the island[13]), or 'too much culture' (as in Hughes' comment about 'living museums'). In either case, Aboriginal 'culture' seems to be understood in a reified manner as an ensemble of traits belonging to the (dehistoricized) past; they either disappear or become inadequate to modern life: 'culture' is not the stuff of everyday practice, a product of continuous adaptation to changing circumstances and efforts at making sense of them, it is what (or what no longer) 'remains', in isolation from the 'mainstream'. And in either case, there is no escape: the only solution is to adopt 'mainstream', functional attitudes, which in themselves seem to be perceived as unmarked by a particular culture: they are simply rational, and in that, almost 'natural' (at least to those who belong to the 'mainstream'). Aboriginal communities, which are 'cultural', or no longer so (and in this case it is remains mysterious what exactly replaces this supposed loss of culture), have to un-learn their cultural habits and/or learn anew these rational attitudes, in order to assimilate to the mainstream. 'Culture' and 'loss of culture' are interchangeable facets of the same essentializing discourse: Aboriginal people's everyday struggles, considered in a

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[11] As with Lindsay's comments, this is prior to land title reform on the island (see note 9).

[12] It is only in the mid-1980s (rather than in the 1970s) that so-called 'self-determination' policies have been implemented on Palm Island: this resulted not in the spontaneous creation of an autonomous Aboriginal community, but in the mild bureaucratic reframing of pre-existing relationships between the Aboriginal community and the State, with the Aboriginal community council now being advised on how to operate and meet bureaucratic requirements, rather than being directly controlled as it previously was by the reserve's superintendent (see Kidd 1997, Watson 2010). Non-Aboriginal workers have continued since then to occupy a large array of executive positions within the community, in the schools, at the hospital and the police station, where Aboriginal people usually operate as teacher aides, nursing aides, cleaners and 'police liaison officers'.

[13] On the (very different) manner in which Palm Islanders imagine their community as made of a multiplicity of 'tribes', see Garond 2014.

dehistoricized and depoliticized manner, are conflated with what is viewed as their essential maladaptive difference. As Lattas and Morris note (2010a), 'Today, it is not the essentialisms and determinisms of biology that serve to racialise Indigenous people but certain psycho-cultural essentialisms and determinisms that treat Indigenous people as prisoners of embedded cultural logics or grammars. Culture has replaced race as the new way of producing internalised essentialisms. Social problems are reduced to cultural problems and, indeed to moral problems, to the inappropriate or dysfunctional use of Indigenous moral schemes'.

Concluding Comments

As within other Aboriginal communities, people on Palm Island are acutely aware of the various problems which are commonly referenced in popular descriptions of Aboriginal communities, and which are present in theirs, such as unemployment and alcohol abuse. Notwithstanding the fact that only a minority within the community are everyday heavy drinkers, or that many people are employed[14], there is enduring concern among Palm Islanders that such negative imagery impinges on people's self-esteem and on their abilities at imagining themselves in another light[15]. As an example, this hip hop verse song by 'Lizzie G' from Palm Island: My people don't need no introduction/We're the people you label with white dysfunction/Our beauty, our pride/You just don't mention/I gotta ask people, what's your intention?

Indeed, the increasing recourse to 'dysfunctionality' to qualify Aboriginal communities may be a good indicator of a particular (neoliberal) 'intention', the growing authority of a particular 'vision of humanity and social order' (Lattas & Morris 2010b: 62), that is, a functionalist vision of humanity as ordered by the rational responses of self-disciplined, self-helping and self-achieving individuals to the neutral and unavoidable demands of a market-driven world. 'Dysfunctionality' seems to point towards an ensemble of counter-rules and values which have been allowed (by the 'laissez-faire' of 'governments') to flourish, and must cease to be tolerated. Simultaneously, 'dysfunctionality' points at another model of individual behaviour and set of values which are contrastively being celebrated. In a book which echoes the issue at stake here, Robin Kelley, a Black American historian writes: 'Certain images of the lazy, irresponsible Negro endure in the form of 'the underclass', 'matriarchy', 'welfare queens', 'criminals', and 'dysfunctional', to name a few. We have been consistently marked as dysfunctional [...] the thing against which normality, whiteness, and functionality have been defined' (Kelley 1997: 3)[16].

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[14] In the 2011 Palm Island census established by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, readily available online, the unemployment rate is estimated at 26.3%, for a labour force of 829 people, out of a total population of 2337. If one wants to recalculate, taking into account the whole 15 years and older population (a total of 1607 people), as compared to the employed population of 611 (829 in the labour force, minus 218 unemployed), the unemployment rate obtained is 38%. Even though the 26.3% unemployment rate given by the ABS is very high, in comparison to national averages, both percentages are still much lower that the mysterious 90% usually mentioned in most media, as well as several recent literary or academic accounts of Palm Island. This in itself is perhaps demonstrative of the manner in which "Palm Island" stands, even to well-informed commentators, their political standpoints aside, as such an extreme epitome of dysfunctionality or disadvantage, that a 90% unemployment rate, for instance, appears perfectly plausible.

[15] See Garond 2012a.

[16] There are many elements in Robin Kelley's book which echo today's debates about Aboriginal communities represented as dysfunctional. As Kelley writes: 'If racism is essentially a thing of the past, as conservatives and many neoliberals now argue, then the failure of the black poor to lift themselves out of poverty has to be found in their behaviour or their culture. In short, the problems facing the vast majority of

Similarly, when Aboriginal people are described as dysfunctional, there is a process of boundary-making at stake, within which what is described as 'dysfunctional' becomes the reversed mirror of what is assumed to be ideally 'functional'. 'Aboriginal dysfunction' bears value in a structuralist but also moralistic sense, that is, as a 'meaningful difference' (Graeber 2005: 439), in relation to which or in contrast to which other, 'good' values (supposedly unmarked by a particular culture) are being defined. The increased use of the term dysfunctionality seems to reveal the growing authority of a value system centred on the economic rationality of the market as, following Dumont, 'the sphere of individual self-realisation' (Graeber 2005: 450). What is deemed to be most dysfunctional, it appears, is a lack of desire, on the part of Aboriginal individuals and Aboriginal communities to engage with the 'rationality' of this sphere of individual self-realisation, which includes the individual's will to get a 'real' job, to acquire a property, or to free oneself from family feuds and 'demand-sharing', and basically, a lack of desire to become 'neoliberal subjects', that is, 'not a citizen with claims on the state but a self-enterprising citizen-subject' (Ong 2006: 14). Dysfunctionality, in this sense, equals 'irrationality' (the irrationality of not really wanting what is rationally valuable), and represents a distorted or counter-form of 'ethics' (which is, as Ong puts it - *ibid*.: 21 - 'a style of living guided by given values for constituting oneself in line with a particular goal'). While the neoliberal ethos is not new within capitalist societies, what is striking in this case, is the increasing sense in which it is celebrated in pointing towards the meaningful difference of the other, now (re)categorized as dysfunctional, to the point where Aboriginality and dysfunctionality almost stand as coterminous.

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black folk in today's ghettos lie not with government policy or corporate capitalism, but with the people themselves' (*ibid*.: 8). Kelley also writes that: 'The same black neoconservatives and conservative nationalists who have dismissed this generation of urban youth are also the biggest proponents of "self-help" as the latest panacea for America's ghettos. A growing number of voices call on black people to break the grip of government dependency and take "personal responsibility" (not coincidentally, the phrase used in the 1996 federal welfare reform bill) (*ibid*.). Loïc Wacquant's work on U.S. prisons and the punitive state in the neoliberal era is also relevant here. Wacquant shows how the withdrawal of 'restraints on capital' and of the welfare state are coupled with a 'fiercely interventionist, bossy, and pricey' state, 'when it comes to handling the social turbulence generated by deregulation and to impressing the discipline of precarious labour'. The new logics of the neoliberal state 'not only contravene the fundamental principle of equality of treatment by the state and routinely abridge the individual freedoms of the dispossessed. They also undermine the consent of the governed through the aggressive deployment of involuntary programs stipulating personal responsibilities just as the state is withdrawing the institutional supports necessary to shoulder these and shirking its own social and economic charges. And they stamp the precarious fractions of the proletariat from which public aid recipients and convicts issue with the indelible seal of unworthiness' (Wacquant 2009: 307-308, 313).

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