

# 1

## Taking difference seriously: Life, income and work for Jon Altman and friends

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The engagement of Indigenous Australians in economic activity is a matter of long-standing public concern and debate. Jon Altman has made it the focus of an academic and public career spanning almost 40 years. First as an economist at Melbourne University and then as an anthropologist at The Australian National University (ANU), Jon explored issues of life, income and work among Indigenous Australians at geographic scales from the local to the national (Altman & Nieuwenhuysen 1979, Altman 1987). He tussled early with policy questions around mining, tourism, arts and homelands (Altman 1983, 1988; Altman & Taylor 1987, Altman et al. 1989) and with the research methods of economic anthropology (Gregory & Altman 1989). All this was done before Jon established the ANU Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) in 1990, of which he became the foundation Director. Jon's output over the next 20 years, often in conjunction with his CAEPR colleagues, was sustained and prolific (Thomassin & Butler 2014). At the 10-year mark, Jon engaged Tim Rowse to review 'the CAEPR corpus', which resulted in the book *Indigenous futures: choice and development for Aboriginal and Islander Australians* (Rowse 2002a). Launching that book, Hal Wootten wondered whether Tim's focus on the ideas of choice

and 'the Indigenous sector' was what Jon expected. For Wootten (2002: 79), this was a worryingly positive 'lens' on developments and achievements about which he was 'much less sanguine'. He saw 'prison camps' with walls only partly torn down, or in the jocular metaphor of Aboriginal people, a 'yabbie bucket' out of which it was still very hard to jump. Rowse's response to Wootten was that he was 'taking choice seriously' among Indigenous Australians, as he argued CAEPR research had done over the previous decade (Rowse 2002b: 82).

My impressions of Jon's work over 35 years are that he has always taken Indigenous choice and difference very seriously. He has seen past Indigenous agency contributing to current social and economic circumstances and current Indigenous agency contributing to future possibilities. This is not to deny that the economic structures surrounding Indigenous people can be powerfully constraining, but it respects Indigenous people as competent judges of the possibilities and opportunities they face. Jon's hybrid economy approach suggests that Indigenous people are competently exploring their comparative advantage drawn from the customary sector, while also exploring the opportunities and constraints they face in the market and state sectors. These exploratory choices both reflect and lead to differences, among Indigenous Australians and between Indigenous and settler Australians. Differences in socioeconomic status cannot simply be reduced to ideas of disadvantage and structural lack of opportunity. These are contentious ideas, but ones worth thinking about hard and taking seriously.

The following collection of papers is drawn from a conference held in September 2014 to coincide with Jon's 60th birthday and his retirement from CAEPR and ANU as a member of staff. It includes contributions from some of Jon's most long-standing colleagues: his economist colleague from the University of Melbourne John Nieuwenhuysen; his anthropology PhD supervisor from ANU Nicolas Peterson; and his postdoctoral collaborator on the methods of economic anthropology Chris Gregory. It also includes numerous contributions from younger scholars who have found Jon's work stimulating or useful in shaping their own. What is missing, quite notably, is papers by Jon's CAEPR colleagues of the last 25 years. This is explained in part by the interest expressed by over 50 people in giving papers at the conference. The program committee of Tim Rowse, Kirrily Jordan and myself chose 35 and in the process cut out a number of offerings by CAEPR staff.

This was not intentional, but it seemed reasonable. Long-standing staff could contribute to the conference and the CAEPR publication program in other ways, while for those beyond CAEPR the conference was a rare opportunity to engage directly with Jon and his work.

Part 1 of this collection focuses on Jon's core concept of the hybrid economy, in theory, practice and policy. In Chapter 2, one of Jon's PhD students, Geoff Buchanan, provides a 'genealogy' of Jon's work, going right back to a Master's thesis on export instability in Samoa. Jon was already interested in the idea of 'subsistence affluence' as an alternative to exposure to the vagaries of the capitalist market economy. Jon's academic journey was 'circuitous', argues Buchanan, taking in 'articulation of modes of production' and 'relative autonomy' before settling on the idea of 'economic hybridity'. At the other end of the collection (Chapter 21), another one of Jon's PhD students, Ben Scambary, argues that Jon has used his privileged position in academia over many years to 'speak truth to power' in a 'frank and fearless' way. Ben's PhD was part of a CAEPR research project on relations between Aboriginal communities and mining companies. He notes acknowledgement that CAEPR's research was 'a key influence on Rio Tinto's \$2 billion mining agreement in the Pilbara', speaking truth to corporate power (see also Scambary 2013).

Two other contributions in Part 1 are from PhD students who have been influenced, though not supervised, by Jon Altman. Kaely Woods is a former senior Indigenous affairs bureaucrat who engaged with Jon and CAEPR during the 1990s and 2000s. Having left the public service, she is now trying to push further Jon's methods of measuring and valuing non-market aspects of Indigenous activity. Woods is using 'choice modelling' to test and value 'the tension and trade-offs between paid employment and cultural activity' for Indigenous people (Chapter 7). In Chapter 8, Annick Thomassin provides a classic account of hybridity in the 'life projects' of Masig Islanders in the Torres Strait. Being a 'fisher' on Masig is, she argues, not a 'job' or a 'profession' but a 'way of life'. While fishing is a useful way to feed the family, it can be seasonal and unreliable, as too can be the income derived from it. So land-based activities under the long-running state sector Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme have provided fishers with a steady base income on which to build.

Although a McGill University PhD scholar, Thomassin has chosen to sit at CAEPR for the last five years, clearly influenced and inspired by Jon's work.

While this volume is a festschrift for Jon Altman, it also attempts to be critical. Jon often gives 'robust' critiques of other people's work and he asks for nothing less in return. In Chapter 3, Chris Gregory picks at the logic of Jon's three-sector model of economic engagement and income generation. In strict binary terms, the model leads to eight segments, not seven, and the sectors themselves must also be separately considered. There are thus 11 distinct spaces to be logically considered in the hybrid generation of work, life and income, not just seven. Chris also points out that Jon's empirical work on the changing relative importance of the three sectors over time is not represented in his Venn diagram. This, Gregory argues, would lead to a consideration of 'changing relations of domination and subordination', as much as hybridity.

Chapters 4–6 continue in this critical vein. De Rijke, Martin and Trigger raise questions about the idea of 'customary environmentalism' which they discern at the heart of Jon's recent research project with others entitled *People on Country*. Despite aspirations of 'two way' knowledge exchange, they argue that contemporary Indigenous environmental work is often a more prosaic form of low-waged employment, continuing more than transforming past economic relations. Nicolas Peterson sees Jon's hybrid economy model as only relevant to a small proportion of Indigenous people, even in remote areas. He suggests that for the 'difficulties the majority of the remote area populations are facing', the model is not 'a coherent basis for policy'. Katherine Curchin offers the idea of 'partial commodification' as a way of thinking more clearly about the 'livelihood activities which typify the hybrid economy' and she notes that there are also many non-Indigenous people, like academics, whose livelihoods 'mediate market and non-market norms'.

The later chapters in Part 1 all focus on the practice of the hybrid economy in particular regions, although at times they are also oriented to theory or policy. In Chapter 9, Seán Kerins and Jacky Green show how they have worked together on alternative development strategies in the Gulf country. This has occurred under the auspices of the *People on Country* project, combining the labours of an Indigenous

land owner and artist with those of an academic collaborator. Green's paintings are both striking and powerfully evocative of ideas of hybrid land-based development. His words of explanation, carefully recorded by Kerins, suggest how these images draw on adverse Indigenous experiences of imposed economic development. The case for difference and alternative development strategies on country could not be more strongly put.

In Chapter 10, Marianne Riphagen revisits Altman's work in the 1980s on tourism and art at Muṭitjulu, adjacent to Uluru. She reflects on more recent developments at Maruku Arts. With the commercial success of wooden artefacts, known as *punu*, declining since 2007, Maruku has experimented with art markets and dot painting workshops for tourists in Yulara since 2012. Riphagen notes that these initiatives have provided additional income for Indigenous artists resident at Muṭitjulu, but that *punu* production has largely been based in other communities some distance away. While the local Muṭitjulu artists have benefited from Maruku's recent experiments, the broader 'regional economy' of art production has had attention drawn away from it and possibly fallen further into decline. Maintaining comparative advantage in the hybrid economy can require changing explorations of possibilities with unintended adverse consequences as well as successes.

In Chapter 11, via a slightly obscure reference to Karl Marx's 11 theses on Feuerbach (Tucker 1972: 107–9), Stephen Muecke and Ben Dibley offer us 'five theses for reinstituting economics' developed from their observations of Broome during conflict over the proposed gas plant at James Price Point. They see the proponents of the gas plant, Woodside and the Western Australian government, as using a 'modern' language of 'the Economy' from which all supposedly benefit. As environmental humanists, Muecke and Dibley want to reinstitute a more grounded, ethnographic language of 'economies' that have local 'contingencies' and do not 'determine all values'. Their economies are 'earthbound' and variable, have 'non-human stakeholders' and are all 'hybrid', just 'especially in Aboriginal Australia'. They see Altman's work as contributing to this 'deflation of the Economy' into 'a diversity of economic activities and livelihood sources which evidence creative postcolonial adaptation'.

Part 2 of the collection focuses on the somewhat unlikely twin ideas of neoliberalism and guardianship in recent debates about Indigenous policy. Shelley Bielefeld shows how there is a return to state paternalism, as well as market liberalism, in recent policies of income management within the social security system. She sees this as a continuation of the unfinished 'colonial project' of reforming Indigenous norms (Chapter 12).

Kerry McCallum and Lisa Waller (Chapter 13) provide an analysis of the media and Indigenous policy over a 20-year period. They focus on *The Australian* newspaper as a self-conscious 'keystone' of Australian Indigenous affairs reporting promoting 'neoliberal policy agendas'. They also note the 'singular influence' of Noel Pearson as a regular commentator columnist in *The Australian*. Jon Altman, by way of contrast, has been a regular commentator columnist in *The National Indigenous Times* and *Tracker*, two somewhat more marginal parts of the Australian media landscape.

Emma Kowal (Chapter 14) offers a more personalised account of how, as a young medical and arts graduate, she enthusiastically stepped into the public health gap between Indigenous and other Australians. A few years later, disillusioned and sensitised to the 'moral politics of race and identity', she developed an analysis of the 'intense identity work that consumes so much effort in Indigenous affairs'. She sees Jon, like herself, as 'trapped in the gap' between 'two equal and opposing fears', which she labels 'remedialism' in one direction and 'orientalism' in the other. This is a sophisticated analytic version of a central question that has always hung over CAEPR's and Jon's work: when is socioeconomic difference to be judged adversely as structural disadvantage and lack of opportunity and when supportively as reflecting autonomy, informed choice and cultural difference (see for example Altman and Rowse 2005)?

In Chapter 15, Leon Terrill uses the idea of renewed state paternalism in his account of the recent push for 'township leases' on Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory. He sees 'neoliberal paternalism' as a two-step process in which the state first imposes higher levels of 'discipline' on poor individuals and households through requirements like standardised rent and tenancy agreements. The more distant and long-term second step is to produce responsible and competent actors in private housing markets. Having identified the first step as

a form of guardianship, Terrill asks whether there are others, besides government, who could exercise this 'control'. Jon would argue that in the 'massive change in land titling in Australia' since 1977, it has been Aboriginal land councils and groups of traditional owners who have exercised such control, but that recent governments have not respected their different choices.

Terrill's contribution leads in well to Part 3 of the collection focusing on applications of Altman's ideas in land, housing and entrepreneurship.

Ed Wensing (Chapter 16) examines both native title and 23 statutory forms of Aboriginal land rights developed in Australia in the last half century. His focus is on the inability of native title holders to use their interests in land as part of the 'modern economy'. He argues that it is appropriate that Aboriginal land cannot simply be sold, but that it ought to be able to be leased and used to secure a mortgage. Some of the statutory land rights regimes show how this can be done, but they too can be restrictive and ultimately are also subject to the restrictions of native title. As a land use planner, Wensing wants to break through some of these 'legal orthodoxies' and think differently.

In Chapter 17, Louise Crabtree takes inspiration from the idea of hybridity in exploring possible alternative affordable housing tenures beyond the existing polarised options of mortgagee home ownership and public housing. Through ideas of community land trusts, she opens up a spectrum of variable equity housing tenure possibilities between these polarities. Her empirical inspiration comes from outside Australia, but is clearly reinforced by Altman's determination to take difference seriously.

David Pollack's political economy of the Aboriginals Benefit Account in the Northern Territory in Chapter 18 is more historical in its inspiration. Rich in legislative and policy detail, it revisits ideas about the use of mining royalty equivalents (MREs) derived from Aboriginal land which Altman explored in an official review in 1985. Pollack asks why the ambiguous policy foundations noted by Altman have continued since with their shortcomings and inconsistencies.

Pamela McGrath (Chapter 19) reports on a study of how much labour, or work, has gone into native title processes for the Nyangumarta people over the last 15 years. McGrath finds that more than 140 Nyangumarta have allocated over 2,700 days to native title business,

but that they have only derived possibly \$250,000 income, as their predominant mode of involvement is as unpaid volunteers. It is the 300 non-Nyangumarta—lawyers, mining executives, bureaucrats, anthropologists, etc.—who have derived significant income from these activities. Jon Altman will not be surprised by these findings, either as a well-paid ANU academic or from his own time allocation studies of Indigenous groups. Indigenous income from activities related to custom is more imputed than monetary, while settlers are well paid for their engagements.

Jock Collins and his co-authors (Chapter 20) report on a recent survey of over 300 Indigenous entrepreneurs, plus 38 more in-depth interviews. Through the idea of the ‘community contribution’ of Indigenous businesses they discern a large hybrid economy, while also arguing that it is the market that sets basic business constraints.

Part 4 of the collection comprises personal reflections, by PhD student Ben Scambary (as already discussed), by senior colleague John Nieuwenhuysen and by Jon Altman himself. John Nieuwenhuysen clearly takes considerable pride in having lured Altman from New Zealand to Australia with the offer of a job at Melbourne University in 1976. Thus began an association of almost 40 years in which, Nieuwenhuysen argues, Jon Altman has kept the ‘faith for independent, fearless scholarly research’ that is ‘directly related to policy’ and ‘exposed to public debate’. Jon Altman’s own reflections reinforce this idea when he notes that the ‘social justice fire’ that he shared with a young Aboriginal man in Melbourne in the late 1970s has not ‘abated’. Jon clearly takes great pride in advocating forcefully for his friends of 35 years at Mumeke and for other Indigenous groups across Australia. Indeed, in retrospect, forceful outspoken advocacy is perhaps Jon’s default setting, which was perhaps just slightly tempered during his first 17 years as the Director of CAEPR.

Nic Peterson identifies 2007 and the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) as a turning point at which Jon Altman became the outspoken critic of ‘the government’s approach in Indigenous affairs’ and was no longer interested in the measured, insider-speak of policy targets and reform. Jon agrees, saying that he took a ‘decisive stance’ against the NTER and that he no longer felt it was ‘possible to produce research in good faith that would be genuinely received by government at face value’. This was a difficult stance to take as

the Director of a university centre receiving significant government funding and, no doubt, it contributed greatly to Jon's decision to stand down from the CAEPR directorship just three years later. These were difficult years at CAEPR, as they were in Indigenous affairs more generally. Collegiality and friendship forged over the previous two decades was tested to the limits, as some wanted to become outsider critics of government with Jon and some to continue to play the measured, insider game.

The tensions within CAEPR during these years were not so much disciplinary as strategic. If, following Altman and Rowse 2005, this was economics and equality versus anthropology and difference, where did John Taylor and I fit in the mix? John Taylor's measured population geographies and demographics were the very centre of the CAEPR corpus, producing powerful numbers with which public servants, politicians and Indigenous communities all wanted to engage. My own contributions from a political science background sometimes included numbers but were more distinctive for their focus on the internal dynamics of the state sector. I am not sure that my contributions were so well appreciated within government and they certainly had little to do with differences between anthropology and economics. But Jon Altman always defended both the independence and the wide interdisciplinary nature of CAEPR, which enabled my own work (and income) to be sustained over many years. For this I will be forever grateful.

It is with sadness that I note the absence of any contribution to this conference or volume from John Taylor. Indigenous affairs is, in many ways, a hard school. John Taylor took over as CAEPR Director in 2010 and continued, with other staff members, to produce those powerful numbers. Jon Altman tells us in his reflections that he had by then abandoned the 'path to parity' with its 'imagined homo-topia' and its 'hegemonic deficit-focused indicators of success, failure and accountability'. This forthright outsider stance meant that Jon Altman was not easy to have on staff at CAEPR over the next four years, but his presence was always worthwhile.

The economic activities of Indigenous Australians are challenging to engage with, conceptually, empirically and strategically. Like Jon, I was drawn into this field as a young postgraduate over three decades ago. Jon's work displayed a clarity of thought and method which is

its hallmark to this day. It also displayed that fire of commitment to social justice and advocacy for modern hunter-gatherers, which is still evident in all that Jon says and does. Just to think that some Indigenous Australians can be modern hunter-gatherers is to take difference very seriously. We need more serious theorists of difference in Australia, like Jon Altman, to continue exploring Indigenous peoples' postcolonial economic possibilities. Otherwise we may indeed lapse into some lazy, unintellectual 'homo-topia'.

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