Forming an Inclusive Community Through Pragmatic Solidarity and Social Policy

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Introduction
In an article presented in the Winter 2002 Policy Magazine, the Centre for Independent Studies argued that the introduction of the concept of ‘social exclusion’ to the poverty debate misled and obscured our rational and empirically justified understanding of the real issues. The authors claimed that the concept of ‘social exclusion’ had been motivated by a ‘politics of envy’ and intentionally introduced to emotionally influence both Government and the public on social policy issues relating to poverty. The article also stated that this utilisation of the ‘politics of language’ muddied the otherwise rationally clear debate that suggested social exclusion was not an issue in Australian society.

I’d like to argue that the introduction of the ‘morally imaginative’ concept of social inclusion was a timely attempt at emotional persuasion and, far from being a tactic of obscurcation and deception, is a necessary element to counteract the current obsession with economical rationalism. The use of the moral imagination in policy dialogue can provide a means of maintaining value in a development of the common good through the principle of solidarity; a development that economic rationalism has, by and large, failed to provide for the people of Australia.

Who are we? Contemporary and Future Australia
In an address to the philosophy forum of the United Nation’s Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, Richard Rorty suggested that a response to the question, “who are we?” must be addressed in terms of the culture that we both represent and hope to represent. “Who are we?” is an appropriate question to any group of people that are trying to understand what unifying ideals draw them together. When this question is posed to a nation, it is a political question aimed at gathering its citizens into a self-conscious moral community. For Rorty the moral community is united by reciprocal trust and an expressed willingness to assist others within the community. So an answer to the question, “who are we as Australians?” aims to forge a national moral identity which is united by these two principles.

The question of the national moral identity is not just a contemporary representation of who we think we are, but is also a future aspiration of who we hope to be. A community formed by “we” statements is not a static entity but an active body striving to realise the potential of its aspirations. Our desires for what we want our nation to be constitute a pragmatic response to the question “who are we?” and we seek to build the kind of nation that we think we should be living in. This pragmatic response is available to different people in differing ways - social policy professionals or academics have a hands-on role in developing social policy that supposedly reflects this national moral identity, while, ideally, voters have the opportunity to express their approval or disapproval through the electoral process.

Beliefs, habits of action and “We” Communities
From a Rortian perspective, developing a national moral identity is not about expressing qualities that we expect individuals to conform to as a common ideal of the Australian

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2 I think that while economic rationalism may have developed some aspects of Australia’s economic growth it has been at the expense of other aspects.
citizen. A national moral identity is established by the intuitive emotion of belonging to a national expression of “we, the people of Australia”. It is about the coherence of the national vocabulary used to formulate the response to the question, “Who are we?” The coherence of this vocabulary is contingent upon the correlation between what the observer perceives as the beliefs they attribute to social policy developers, and the habits of action which follow from this belief-attribution in the form of actual social policy.

From a pragmatic perspective, beliefs are considered to be habits of action. So, a belief attribution is held to be true if the statements expressing the attributed belief match the habits of action that result from holding such a belief. In basic language, people judge the integrity of a statement by seeing if we, ‘practice what we preach’. Because a belief attribution is only useful if it can correctly predict behaviour on the basis of the belief, we hold that a person is genuine when their actions correctly match their stated beliefs. The coherence of the vocabulary of a self-conscious moral community rests on the evaluation of consistency in the purported statements of belief made by our political and bureaucratic leaders and the outcomes that we find in Government’s applied social policy.

So the question is, why focus on social policy? Largely because I believe that social policy and culture influentially interact and that social policy is often an expression of our cultural attitude towards other people. Social policy is an official expression of our attitudes towards other citizens and often implicitly delineates between those who are considered to be “one of us” and those who are not. Our immigration policies are an example of this clear delineation. No one would rightly believe that we would consider these to be policies expressing our solidarity with asylum seekers. In this instance, social policy not only clearly states that these people are not to be included in our self-conscious moral community, but also attempts, via various means, to vilify asylum seekers so that we are not inclined to extend our sense of a national moral identity to include them.

The delineation that occurs in this instance is rather explicit. However, exclusion occurs in a more surreptitious manner when it comes to our own citizens. And such exclusion is often difficult to detect as it relies on a person’s emotional response to the dissonance that often occurs between the political discourse of national cohesion expressed by our leaders and people’s lived experience of feeling abandoned by our social policies.

“We” Communities and Economic Triage

Before I begin on this section, I must confess that I am not an economist and are therefore relatively naïve to the complexities of economic argument. However, this paper is not about an economic justification for policies of social inclusion but an attempt to indicate how relying on an economic metanarrative for our society can certainly be detrimental to the possibilities of a genuinely inclusive nation.

The existence of a self-conscious moral community that can without qualification consider itself to constitute “we, the people of Australia” shall most likely never exist. Aside from a utopian ideal, it would be hard to imagine any country that doesn’t have a number of citizens at any given time who feel that they are being excluded from the national moral identity. However, the utopian ideal does provide us with at least that – an ideal to which we can

4 Although this is very much the theoretical background to Mutual Obligation – that we cannot have distributive principles without balancing contributive principles.

aspire. And this aspiring to the ideal, while continuing to recognise that it is not an actuality, is what constitutes the *project of inclusion*.

The gap that exists between the rich and poor in this country is a recurrent theme in social policy debate. Regardless of our academic opinion about whether this inequality in the distribution of wealth has been exacerbated in recent times, it is nonetheless a source of exclusion for many Australians. I now outline Rorty’s model of *economic triage* to show how economic feasibility creates policies of exclusion rather than inclusion, and to then return to my introductory comments that attempt to justify the use of the politics of the language of social exclusion, and the vocabulary of persuasion which seeks to direct social policy towards greater inclusion.

We are confronted with a dilemma in the future of Australian social policy and our response to the question, “who are we as Australians?” Part of this dilemma is rooted in the issue of wealth distribution and is problematic to our capacity for a more inclusive society. For the sake of the argument I shall leave aside the debate about the extent of a divided Australia, and simply acknowledge that a wealth gap *does* exist between rich and poor. This wealth gap is often used to fire political discourse about taxation and a fairer redistribution of the country’s wealth. However, a serious move of wealth from the top deciles to the lower deciles is not a politically feasible option. That is, while there may be a general consensus of well being towards those who are struggling, there is an unwillingness to allow taxes to be raised to achieve the goal of a complete redistribution. We must remember here that, by and large, those who create social policy are the ones who would also have the most to lose from such a large redistribution. However, it is also these people who most often publicly attempt to remind Australians that we continue to have an egalitarian country that cares for all its people.

But there is more to the situation. The continued move to evaluate social policy, particularly welfare policies, by their economic efficiency indicates that the willingness of Government to assist citizens has become increasing conditional on its financial capacity to do so. Recall that, according to Rorty, the attempt to gather people into a self-conscious moral community or nation requires that the community is *united* by reciprocal trust and a willingness of members to offer assistance to other members in need.

We now have a self-conscious moral community that becomes restricted in its capacity for inclusion by the number of citizens it is economically capable of assisting. This is Rorty’s understanding of economic triage – that the rich and well-off (and remember, these are generally the people who at least have the final word on social policy) are placed in a situation that to maintain a high standard of living, their individual hopes and aspirations, and the institutions necessary to run a democracy they must prioritise expenditure towards these goals. To redirect this expenditure to the more needy of our society would put at risk these other ideals. It is now politically unfeasible to offer the less well off the assistance that they require due to our apparent “limited resources”.

Economic triage then is a major barrier to creating a more inclusive nation, and this is reflected in the fact that economic efficiency is the greatest factor influencing social policy. This is most prevalent in the current initiatives of welfare reform. There is a heavy emphasis on instilling people with a firmer resolve to be self-reliant. While there are psychological benefits to increased self-reliance, the message that people take from this principle of social

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6 This is actually the case. Whether or not this gap has expanded over the past years is another issue. But regardless, that the gap exists is problematic for policies of inclusion.
policy is of a community that, far from moving towards further inclusion, is heading towards one of increased individualism and exclusive membership – a community whose social policy body says, ‘we are no longer willing to offer the assistance that you would expect from a self-conscious moral community. You must now rely upon yourself’.

So how can we avoid economic triage? Simply, we must choose to do so. This is why the principle of solidarity is so important in the battle for policies of inclusion. Solidarity is an expansion of ‘we-intentions’, that is, it allows us to continue to broaden our concept of “we, the people of Australia” so that all citizens sense that they are incorporated by policies of inclusion.

**Solidarity and “we-intentions”**

The principle of solidarity is a key component in the extension and maintenance of a self-conscious moral community. The idea of ‘we-intentions’ are very similar to that of solidarity in that “we-intentions” is the pragmatic attitude of people who constitute a community by virtue and to the extent that they think of each other as ‘one of us’. Likewise, solidarity requires that we recognize another person as “one of us.” The extent to which we cannot express solidarity with another person is the extent to which we exclude that person from our self-conscious moral community.

The question “who are we?” should encourage us to create a more expansive and inclusive sense of solidarity. The reason why solidarity in this sense is pragmatic rather than the result of a rational deduction is because our sense of ‘we’, particularly for a plural society, can no longer be based in the claim that there is a particular human essence that resonates amongst all peoples. Solidarity concerns the choices we make about contributing to a culture of inclusion rather than exclusion - it is a creative concept that aims at an expanded sense of “we, the people of Australia”, and is the principle that can challenge the exclusion of economic triage.

**Social Exclusion?**

The element of intuitive emotion is also an important aspect of the debate about social exclusion and inclusion...

The debate about the prevalence of social exclusion cannot be left to a calculative/rational critique only. This is why articles that deride the utilisation of the politics of language by those seeking to direct social policy towards greater inclusion are misleading. And, I would also like to argue, that this is where those who genuinely believe social exclusion to exist and wish to see a more inclusive society often become frustrated – because they think that they must always fight the battle on a rational, evidence-based approach. Although, and this conference is testimony to this, I do believe that there is ample evidence to show that ‘social exclusion’, far from being a strategy of the politics of envy, is certainly effecting the lives of many Australians. I am not stating that there is no room for an evidence-based approach to social policy. There is, and always shall be. However, this is not to concede that this is the only approach to take. Our language is an incredibly important and powerful tool in the political landscape, and the rational/calculative manner of addressing issues is only one half of the human experience.

In Jungian psychology, human thought is divided into rational and irrational functions. The rational functions consist of thinking and feeling, while the irrational functions consist of sensing and intuiting. In a heavy emphasis on an evidence-based approach to social policy, we tend to over-emphasise the rational/irrational combination of thinking and sensing. This is the combination that assists us to evaluate empirical evidence. However, the other combination of
rational/irrational thought functions highlights the intuitive and emotional components of human thought, and are instrumental in the recognition of values. I would like to propose that the use of the politically laden concept of social exclusion is appropriate in our discussions and responses to the question, “who are we?” as it provides us with an understanding of the value that people place on feeling included.

“Who are we?” is a question that is inherently focused on the tension between inclusion and exclusion. An individual’s response is dictated by the emotional value that they place on their intuitive understanding of being included. To claim that someone is not excluded because they do not come under an academically defined exclusion category, ‘X’ cannot take into account the reality of their emotional response of feeling excluded. It may be the case that one could deny the experience of exclusion. This may happen if no one fell into the evaluative exclusion category X and no one actually felt emotionally excluded from a national moral identity because there was consistency between the “we” statements of this morally self-conscious community and its habits of practice expressed in social policy. But this is not the case.

People do feel excluded, alienated and often belittled by social policy initiatives. People do feel that what the Government claims is the case about “we, the people of Australia” is considerably different to their lived experience of social policy. And this leads people to feel excluded because when they hear political and social leaders speak of “we, the people of Australia” they do not feel included in that because there is certainly no reciprocal trust and they feel that any assistance offered to them is done so begrudgingly and is constrained by economic feasibility.

When people respond with emotion to feeling excluded from the self-conscious moral community of “we, the people of Australia”, defined by political and social leaders, we have every right (and need) to represent the emotional aspect of social exclusion, particularly in a society that is obsessed with economic rationalism and an evidence-based approach. To point out how we may add emotional depth to the evaluation process of social policy initiatives is a legitimate and essential element in achieving a paradigm shift towards an inclusive nation.