Citizenship and the social fringe:  
The significance of marginal and alternative networks and groups

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Introduction

The socio-political climate in Australia can be adverse for many social groups and cause a dislocation from the common unity, and worse, no sense of belonging. For some it can be attributed as a mismatch in acclimatization to the dominant culture, while for others it can result from ‘falling’ through the system of social support structures and services. Yet for others it can manifest rejection counter to the central tenets attributed to the political ways in which people live together as a national mainstream unit. This paper is concerned with the social citizenry of those living on the ‘fringe of mainstream’ Australian society.

The research behind this paper was concerned with personal ‘grass root’ support groups and networks where shared interests and values produced the basis in formation for those dislocated from the mainstream community. With national and other tiers of governments now struggling to balance economic wellbeing with social wellbeing, the study attempted to shed greater understanding of the needs and aspirations of those who in many ways have become increasingly excluded by the current direction in nation state building and maintenance. On the one hand there are elements of homelessness, joblessness, cultural-based isolation and other forms of marginality that bear witness to fault lines within the social framework. On the other, there are alternative ‘lifeworld’ extensions by people digressing from the current main order through mediums such as intentional communities, ‘New Age’ spirituality, and pro-active environmentalism.

A representation of a variety of fringe social groups and networks was selected across Victoria to compare relative data that could establish common themes and significant differences within their respective interactive functions. The range of collectives within the fringe groupings was selected on the variations of their structures and memberships between one another. The term ‘collective’ is used to describe the social form of micro network and group orientation of those associated with this research. In this sense the collective consists of people in unity interacting with a rational purpose of offering mutual support and/or a means of realizing an agreed aggregate of motives. In general the periphery to mainstream was signified by a weakened association to conventional paid employment, either through personal circumstance or lifestyle choice.

Other shorthand terms are used in this paper to assist in distinguishing between the dominant public sphere of mainstream community and the subordinate fringe public sphere. The term ‘mainstream’ refers to the dominant culture of the nation comprising in content beliefs, ideas and values that in turn form the content of culture represented through objects, symbols or technology; while the term ‘fringe’ refers to marginal social identities and counter-cultural segmentations subordinate to the norms of mainstream society.
The mediums of communication between individuals and social collectives are extensive, but the study foundation of this paper focused on direct physical contact as the defining means of interaction. There are many forms of linkages bringing people together to share common interests and provide mutual benefits, and in this modern age the computer has generated its own variations. Indeed, one group utilized various technological communication channels - including the Internet – for reaching a broad audience with the purpose of bringing many people together for collective spiritual experience. However, for this particular study it was the dynamics with the direct physical interaction surrounding collective activity that was of chief interest.

Civil society engagement is where action with others through discussion and collaborative effort can “influence and shape” society (Kenny, 2004:71), notwithstanding the complexities through manipulations by state and market factors that intersect this realm. It has been assessed that social interconnections between those not fully engaging the dominant public sphere provide possibilities for solidarity social arrangements that have their own significance beyond ‘market-orientated’ community (Beck, 1992; Crow, 2002). The intention through this paper is to shed light in understanding further what these possibilities may be by examining the social bonds formed through groups and networks by individuals detached from the dominant public sphere. It will also attempt to demonstrate that associations through social collectives are important for the citizenry experience of individuals where the state apparatus has otherwise not fulfilled their needs. In so doing, the findings advance that it is possible nation states – such as Australia – need to review ideas about ‘citizenship’ and ‘governance’ in recognition of social achievements through the fringe collective.

There are two basic reasons for concentrating on the social fringe element. Firstly, they provide an insight as to why and how the dysfunction of mainstream society occurs; and secondly, collectives within the fringe element draw on strengths of solidarity for innovation in psychologically dealing with dislocation from the mainstream. Each of these two aspects of mainstream digression not only provide an understanding of the problems experienced by some within today’s Australian society, but also, what indeed can be learnt from the rationale and experience they provide in cohesive endeavor counter to the powerful will of mainstream. By focusing on these lived experiences, the views of the people functioning outside market orientations of mainstream provide different distinctions on social achievement that have implications for Australian notions of equality, democracy, and citizenry obligations; their lives suggest a stark contrast in citizenry experience and significance to those forming around dominant views.

**Study Overview**

The research project on which this paper is based employed a qualitative approach to provide appropriate emphasis to the lived experiences of the research subjects. This enabled the study to locate the intricacies involved in group dynamics and cohesive maintenance within the selected social groups, which was essential in this instance.
because of the focus given over to the interactive nature between the members of each collective. From this standpoint, the project involved selecting subjects on a quasi-random basis for a non-probability sampling investigation exercise, and the following key details applied:

- 16 social collectives represented through purposive sampling selection (9 marginal and 7 alternative groups and networks).
- 40 people participated in the interview program (22 marginal and 18 alternative collectives).
- Two or more participants represented 12 of the collectives.
- Majority of the participants were interviewed individually; the variation to this occurred by preference of certain members from three collectives for small group interview sessions.
- Interview program consisted of three separate sessions for each participant between 2000 and 2002. (75% of the participants were able to complete the program).

The collectives were sourced on the basis of largely operating at some distance to the mainstream community to bring into sharper focus innovations in self-help. The nine marginal social groups and networks selected were varied in composition and function, but commonalities rested on the people involved coming from disadvantaged or relatively low socio-economic backgrounds. They included a group of homeless people acting as an editorial group for a newsletter promoting health and well-being; two caravan park groups for low cost accommodation, with one located in a provincial city and the other in a rural township; two refugee support groups involving people with Horn of Africa heritage; an Indigenous Australian support network concerned with health and cultural issues; two gender-specific support groups that involved a men’s workshop support group and a women’s meditation support group for victims of family and social disruption; and a support network associated with what is generally referred to as a community or neighbourhood house. The seven alternative lifestyle orientated collectives had in common an identifiable functioning profile ‘outside’ certain mainstream community systemic apparatuses through lifestyle choice. These included a nation-wide spiritual group orientated to ‘earth-based’ beliefs, in particular certain North American Indian practices; two suburban intentional communities (or communes), with one long-term co-housing orientated, the other occupying a former lawn bowls club facility on a short-term basis; a Local Exchange Trade and Services (LETS) bartering rural-based network; consisting of those interested in self-sufficiency lifestyle measures; a shared workspace collective – that included operations in bicycle repairs, a radical community newsletter, meditation and alternative healing, among others – operating out of an old clothing factory; and a nation-wide mentoring network with international linkages to assist those interested in establishing intentional communities.
In all cases the disconnection many in the collectives felt about their citizenry experience compared with ‘middle-Australia’ related to differences with the consumer-orientated predominance of the Australian population. While none of the participants believed their lives could be absolutely insulated from mainstream, many adjusted their circumstances to be less reliant on such connections. Solidarity was critical in the action each respective group and network embarked upon outside mainstream institutional and system frameworks. The level of self-assurance to deal with dislocation from mainstream depended on the degree in which the participants themselves felt they were capably managing their lives. Many expressed a degree of resurrection to their lives relating to severed employment, broken relationships, drug-alcohol abuse, and inspired political thinking. Locating a sense of security or wishing to contribute to addressing ideological needs of the individuals themselves, or concern for the physical or psychological needs of others, generated the attachment to their respective networks. Most participants demonstrated by attitude and action a positive stance of their situation that can be termed as ‘active citizenship’ as opposed to ‘passive citizenship’. The usage of these terms in the contemporary citizenship discourse is centred on people having the scope as citizens to actively engage in the construct of their own lives through responsibility and action (Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Clarke, 1996; Kane, 2000; Kenny, 2004).

**Trust plus identity equals action**

Without exception all participants in the study felt mutual trust was the underpinning feature to their collective relationships, and critical to their social cohesiveness. Trust-bonding cohesiveness sometimes referred to as ‘social capital’, is regarded as being “an analytical tool capable of explaining the roots of civic engagement” (Rotberg, 2001:3). In the context of this proposition and the relationship of trust, Eva Cox relates:

> I … define trust as the currency of social capital, in other words, the probably measurable quality of the relationships. In the institutional sphere, I am using the term ‘civic trust’ and, in the interpersonal one, ‘social trust’. Trust in this context is the sum of the expectations that people have and the way this is ‘spent’ and renewed through experiences and relationships. Trust leads to engagement and commitment and therefore to social bonds. (Cox, 1998:162)

In the study behind this paper the associations and their social bonding have not been in the ‘institutional sphere’, as Cox puts it; rather, through their mainstream fracturing they have been outside the general ‘civic’ core understanding of the public sphere, yet public nevertheless. Nancy Fraser’s concept of ‘subaltern counterpublics’ within stratified societies is useful in this case to appreciate fully the fringe collective; this she describes as “spaces of withdrawal and regroupment” and as “training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (1997:82). Much of the connectedness within the fringe groups and networks moved beyond social bonding to achieve another domain
of cohesive action between the interpersonal and institutional spheres of trust. This placed most collectives outside the two domains Cox is referring to, with perhaps four exceptions. (Those that arguably advanced little beyond the interpersonal social bonding were the two caravan park groups, the men’s workshop support group, and the community-learning centre support network). In these instances the bonding became important social extensions, but there was little evidence of a common project as such evolving through their relationship beyond the interpersonal. In the remaining twelve collectives, social trust was the basis for extending into a ‘quasi-civic’ trust projected as a way forward in self-help and aspiring endeavors outside the parameters of mainstream systemic, or institutional, civic trust. This domain of bonding through trust between the interpersonal and the civic core, where action objectives are instituted in conjunction with others, generates what is called here a civic periphery.

Critical conscious conviction: shared awareness in difference to mainstream

The platitude of mutual understanding and trust critical for the civic periphery bonded action produced in many instances heightened self-awareness for the social circumstances of the respective individuals. As observed by Verity Burgmann (2003) in her deliberations on the process for social change, the ‘conscientization’ notion presented by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire provides a useful concept to help explain where faith and endeavor produce this collective action. Translator Myra Bergman Ramos explains Freire’s essential ‘conscientization’ concept with its intended exclusion of fanaticism as a “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1972:15, translators footnote). This action is the difference between those collectives that form primarily as interpersonal bonding compared with those that form out of conviction to instigate a change through action upon their circumstances. This was demonstrated in the functions of the two gender-specific collectives – the Men’s workshop and the women’s meditation support groups. Both groups were formed to address mainstream dysfunctions; the former to primarily combat social isolation through individualized engagement with practical trade skill mediums (not withstanding the importance of mental and other health issues addressed as incidental aspects of this group’s function), whilst the latter was established specifically to assist coping capacities on personal issues impinging on social skills, through the medium of group meditation and disclosure sessions. I therefore apply the term ‘critical consciousness conviction’ to describe the bonding at this point where self-help, support and aspiring action outside the civic core of mainstream systems and institutions begin evolving to counter barriers in mainstream participation. For this is where purposeful bonding has produced deliberate actions to affect change with empowerment consequences over significant aspects of each individual’s respective social condition.

For those involved in the study, accompanying the critical consciousness conviction also came with an identity awareness that distinguished them from mainstream. While not all from the fringe viewed their fractured mainstream relationship as an inferior ranked status (as evident by one spiritual network participant describing his position as being
“fun class” in comparison to mainstream materialism cultural routines) several saw their position less liberating. Hence the class position pronouncements as being “the bottom of the strata” (women’s meditation participant); the “shit end” (shared workspace participant); and “third class” (refugee group participant). This indicates that the feeling for distinction from mainstream difference by those on the fringe was broadly measured against the relative economic wealth and conventional social status comparison to middle Australia. With this – not withstanding the ‘fun class’ optimism – underpinned the strong sense from the participants of a fractured existence with mainstream. Although it must also be noted that with certain collectives (notably the refugee networks) fracturing was viewed as being a relatively temporary condition in the hope that greater social integration would eventually be achieved.

Many of the marginal collectives consciously followed a course of innovation in social development to benefit others. The newsletter editorial group with a focus to promote health awareness (including personal hygiene and sexual reproduction issues) among those in unstable living arrangements epitomised this. In certain cases both socio-economic and cultural factors were responsible in compounding the difficulties that gave cause for collaborative action. Notably this occurred within the leadership members of the refugee youth groups and the Aboriginal culture-health network. In these instances the cultural-orientated fringe collectives endeavoured to search for ways in which their associates could locate improved pathways in dealing with disenfranchised states from mainstream.

From the alternative fringe perspective the current Australian political-economic framework was the main cause for the fractured disposition from mainstream. The operatives of the nation-state together with the contorting dimensions of global interaction produce the stark differences of the ‘consumer-orientated citizen’ pre-eminence of mainstream, and the alternative ‘ecologically-conscious citizen’. The predominance given to the logic of the market and the modern administrative state was problematic for the day-to-day needs of the fringe elements, and they responded by forging approaches to in-part redress the dominant political-socio condition. A touch of radicalism contained within the alternative collective participants’ rejection of excessive materialism accounted largely for the differences. Many saw their position as one of opposition to the political direction facilitating the economic and social growth impacting on sustainability; and often ‘what we are doing’ deliberations allied to Hannah Arendt’s labour/work/action ruminations land-marked in her work entitled the Human Condition has been a driving force in the deflection from the ‘excesses’ of mainstream. A consciousness for ‘social change’ to protect the physical environment was demonstrated in particular through the self-sufficiency network people and the three intentional community orientated collectives.

Culturally based issues also had an important bearing on the development of the critical consciousness conviction realised within the collectives. This is highlighted by one participant from the Aboriginal culture-health network in particular with his adamant stance against what he saw as dominant White Australia systems when he stated: “we don’t want any interference”. The identity distinction of his cultural heritage was a
significant part on how he personally connected with his own people and other Indigenous Australians, as well as how he interacted with mainstream. His feelings about his peoples’ mainstream disenfranchisement drove him to search for a balance in personal emancipating and empowering adjustments between his cultural heritage and the mix of the mainstream modernising prism. The dilemma about how much tradition is surrendered in the process to shape integration with the mainstream cultural predominance also arose among the refugee participants demonstrated by one who tellingly expressed his cultural conundrum as “being pulled between two elephants”. The ‘testing’ between what could be assumed and what could be surrendered between the heritage and integration cultural forces was very much an individual process through the cohesiveness within the collectives.

The sense of meaning of the world through cultural frameworks was not only an issue for those that have an inherited claim. Apart from those with definitive cultural heritage roots consisting of practiced traditions and belief systems directly passed on from generation to generation – as represented by the study’s Aboriginal and the Horn of Africa refugee participants – there were those that sought to ‘import’ further meaning to their personal lives by pursuing specific cultural traditions of interest that were not of generation lineage to them. The study provided evidence of at least two such levels of ‘cultural acquisition’, and these levels related to the actual extent the individuals concerned adopted a set of beliefs and traditions from outside their personal family experiences. The spiritual network participants integrated their lives around certain traditions and beliefs of the North American Indian plain tribes, in this instance associated with the Lakota nation, and also assumed some reconciliatory earth-based understandings with Indigenous Australian traditions. The three participants concerned with this network all exercised various ‘imported’ traditional practices and allied rituals as part of their lifestyle. Others associated with the study, in particular certain participants from within the long-term intentional community, viewed philosophical and practical aspects of non-generational cultures as personally useful to add to their framework of beliefs (for example, Wiccan pagan spirituality beliefs). The adoption of these cultural determinations to the personal frameworks of some individuals added to the identity foundation of the relationships shared with like-minded others. Thus personalised cultural imperatives for some individuals – traditionally acquired or otherwise – gave shape to the outlook and bonded action between associates of several collectives.

The psychology and dynamics in politics of exclusion and oppression

The difference of being on the periphery of mainstream goes deeper than an economic orientated class status condition. There are counter symbolic imageries that produce divisive – rather than inclusive – attitudes that had an effect on several of the study participants, and these are akin to the divisiveness Boris Frankel discerns as follows:

For the ‘marginal’ lifestyle is itself essentially depoliticised and non-oppositional despite periodic ‘anti-establishment’ acts and expressions. ‘Street’ cultures have little more than nuisance value in capitalist Australia –
‘human garbage’ to be kept out of mainstream Australia’s daily life by police and other agencies.

(Frankel, 1992:206)

Many participants felt a strong sense of negativity within mainstream towards them based on their social position. It was perhaps highlighted more by the alternative element by their daring to live differently. Conducting their lives counter to the excesses of market capitalism brought disapproving responses, such as not having ‘real’ jobs or ‘real’ housing (spiritual network participant), and as being “pretty hopeless” misfits (LETS participant). It also brought about perceptions of how mainstream would view their circumstances such as the derogatory “bludger” term self-applied by one participant in expressing his jobless situation. These reflections indicate ascribed difference to popular morality stances levied against those not participating in mainstream.

There is evidence that these perceptions do extend into rhetorical public intolerance and in policy articulation asserting behaviour modification (for example, policy practice prescribed through employment and social security programs such as ‘work for the dole’ and ‘case management’). This has been noted by social commentator Kirk Mann in regard to national superannuation and pension strategies to assist state management of an ageing population, where he argued that the perception of those unable to make premium payments because of their low income are responded to as not ‘proper consumers’ (2003). Zygmunt Bauman too has noted unemployment as an inhibiting factor he scornfully refers to as giving rise to the ‘flawed consumer’ in the ‘society of consumers’ (2004:13-14). An unemployed single mother (as proposed by Swift, 2000:10-11) for example, is not likely to have the financial capacity to be considered a ‘proper consumer’ by virtue of her disadvantage in income and security position, when compared with a successful business executive. In his criticism of the government’s superannuation strategy, Mann observed that such people are considered not to shared the “heroic consumer” passion, and paraphrased the tone of calculated resentment as being ‘drongos who haven’t planned’ (2003). Fraser has also acknowledged welfare programs targeting the poor actualising outcomes “not only for material aid, but also for public hostility” (2003:65). Similarly, a national ‘inspired’ rhetoric also has emerged in popular usage to formulate what constitutes a ‘proper Australian’; not long ago a journalist noting the growing usage through the media of the blameworthy jibe ‘un-Australian’ maintained that the Prime Minister John Howard more than any other public figure applied the term throughout the 1990s, and did so to demean groups and individuals who may have responded negatively to the federal government’s actions and political direction on economic and social matters (Bevilacqua, 2005). These negative pronouncements articulated regularly through the media and by politicians demonstrate intolerance and inflexibility publicly for ‘difference’ in the mainstream imaginings of social order.

The condemnation of the social fringe for their different association with consumerism and materialism practices goes deeper than simply derogatory comment; it directly impairs participation parity in citizenry with their middle-Australian counterparts. Added to the critique themes on fair employment access, attention has emerged on increasing...
behaviour-modifying policies for the marginalized in the name of ‘mutual obligation’ as so-called assault on welfare dependency, through such tools as ‘case-management’ to ‘correct’ means of individualism for independent income (refer Sprigg, 1996; Norton, 2000; Lackner, 2002; Warburton and McDonald, 2002; Parker, 2004; Humpage, 2004; Mendes, 2005). Similar policy approaches are also found in those targeting asylum seekers (refer Mares, 2002; Harris & Williams, 2003), and many of those directed at Indigenous Australians (Reynolds, 1996; Grattan, 2000; Robbins & Summers, 2002; Anderson, 2002). At times the behaviour curbing practices consist of a frustrating array of bureaucratic obstacles; such was the experience by one caravan park resident in the study who had to wait many months before having his medically certified work incapacities finally accepted by the nation’s social security agency. Other times the behaviour displays a bludgeoning persona; as demonstrated by the tactics of government and media bias against protestors who dared to question the direction and implications of global capitalism experienced by study members of one intentional community group at the 2000 World Economic Forum in Melbourne. These incidences demonstrate where tolerance of difference to mainstream imaginings of social order lie, and indicate a likelihood for those on the fringe being ostracized for not conforming to the popular consumer culture.

Those ‘outside’ the mainstream imaginings are further shunned from systems of political process by the negating developments to ‘participatory politics’ by media-driven ‘theatrical politics’, where marketing of ideas becomes more important than testing ideas through balanced debate. In the second volume of his extensive work on the ‘information age’, Manuel Castells (1997) explores the prospect of alienation resulting from socio-political trends within global economic and information systems of the western political condition. He points to the emergence of the electronic communication and its controllers as the arena for where political policy encapsulations are weighted:

… the convergent effects of the crisis of traditional political systems and of the dramatically increased pervasiveness of the new media, political communication and information are essentially captured in the space of the media. Outside the media sphere there is only political marginality… this framing of politics by their capture in the space of the media (a trend characteristic of the Information Age) impacts not only elections, but political organization, decision-making, and governance, ultimately modifying the nature of the relationship between state and society.

(Castells, 1997:312)

There is an abstraction to be taken from Castells’ comments that suggest an overwhelming number of the participants from the study-base of this paper were – and likely still are – by circumstance politically and socially sidelined. In part this occurs because they are pitted against those that have the influence and capability to directly involve media presentations and muster political might that countenance ‘idea marketing’ and ‘social power contrivance’, currently fashioned to economic rationalist imperatives.
This is demonstrated in a US context through Richard Swift’s analogy of the corporate chief executive versus the single mother:

You cannot separate economic power from political power. Under a corporate-dominated economy it is a joke to talk of ‘free and equal citizens’. No-one believes that the CEO … who pumps millions of dollars into US political parties, is ‘free and equal’ with a black welfare mother living in the slums of Richmond, Virginia. It is impossible to have a truly democratic government if you don’t have a democratic society – and our corporate-dominated society is actually a form of economic dictatorship. (Swift, 2000:10-11)

Thus ecological and social parity grounded ideas on ‘what we are doing’ through the lens of Arendt’s Human Condition contemplations, are nullified by short-term neo-liberalism necessities over and above issues that profoundly impact upon the fringe condition. This is the generating of the polarization between the elites and the ‘lesser classes’, as Bauman (1998a, 1998b, 2004) and David Harvey (2000) attest. The study’s participants’ despair is only comforted by a hope that someday things will change; this may be through the desire to ultimately shape an emulated lifestyle to that of the elites, or through a substantial shift in the social order that can better accommodate egalitarian needs, or something in between. In the meantime, the fringe must deal with alienation and subsequent oppression distilled from the dominant economic-centric cultural imperialism. To those trapped in cycles of poverty, Frankel (1992) and Bauman (2004) report their state is akin to human wastage; for those pushing boundaries in social change for lifestyle extensions beyond consumerism or cultural-based acceptance, Jan Pettman (1992) and Burgmann (2003) report their condition misconceived as threats to social order requiring containment and management. In consequence, as identified by neo-liberal critics, the fringe are under-valued socially because of judgments passed on their low socio-economic circumstances (refer in this instance Pettman, 1992; Fraser 1997, 2003; Bauman 1998b, 2004). ‘What we are doing’ in this era is being overly prescribed by consumerism and leaving the flawed consumers relegated as oddities of the social order, and as such placing them in the position of being ostracized for their departure from the popular consumer culture of mainstream.

The negative attitudes and ‘targeted’ policy measures express definitive boundaries to what is and what isn’t acceptable in mainstream participation on false pretexts. Much of this is demonstrated by an emotive ‘moral imagination’ instilled in government policy found in those typically purporting ‘mutual obligation’ (Harris and Williams, 2003; Mendes, 2003, 2005). These occurrences demonstrate that contemporary citizenry norm is impregnated by expectation for the individual to engage unequivocally as an active economic contributor. If for whatever reason a person fails to perform satisfactorily in this area of ‘individualism’ then such deviation, according to Harris and Williams, incites value-posited judgments that “questions the citizenship of those not passing the test” (2003:217). The identity factor of those on the fringe is defined by the attitudes of mainstream on the basis of perceptions of their economic and consumer position. It

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places the fringe element into a different stream of citizenship experience. It is an experience in citizenry that they can only share respectfully among the membership of their episodic groups and networks.

**Dignity and community building against winds of social exclusion**

The significant finding for the participants from the study has been their ability to locate ‘mooring points’ for meaning and dignity through their collectives at intermittent stages in their lives. From an Australian community practice perspective, Jim Ife reminds us that there is a “richness and complexity of human life” associated in the modern social condition incorporating dimensions of social, economic, political, cultural, environmental and personal/spiritual overlays (1995:131). Such community aspects have their own degree of personalized significance across each dimension for meaning and dignity. The formation into associations by individuals, as Ife determines, is invested in “(g)roup process, inclusiveness, building trust, and developing a common sense of purpose” that in turn are significant elements in community building (1995:192); in this instance the term ‘community building’ refers to the means by which functional communities facilitate their development. As noted earlier, this reinvigorated sense of meaning has brought the study participants into an active citizenry experience that assists in liberation from exclusion and refocuses their life on proactive processes for self-support and self-determination. This occurs at a number of levels, according to the function of the collectives. For example, the women’s meditation support group demonstrated the personal discovery focus for the means in addressing barriers to social integration, while the intentional community and the old factory warehouse collectives strived for a reconstituted social experience in lifestyle. Other examples demonstrated less formalized mooring points of social connection, but nevertheless were also found to be important by their inter-personal supportive benefits in re-establishing and strengthening social interaction. Social connectedness within fringe collectives not only serves to counter isolation, it also serves to activate reflective individualized purpose and meaning.

Through their detached state from mainstream, the marginalised and the alternative collectives have ventured into substitute community building processes. The study interviews revealed members of fringe groups and networks played an active role in innovative leadership on matters actually enhancing the capacity of others to participate/integrate more fluently with the mainstream condition. This was exemplified by the youth support work of the two refugee groups and the Aboriginal network, a project of recycling commercial waste for community market composting by one of the intentional community groups, and iron-bark forest preservation by self-sufficiency network members. Other forms of community-orientated goodwill revealed in the study may not have been grandiose in scale of benefit, nevertheless demonstrated social cohesive gestures. Such type of action is more communitarian-orientated in values than individualism-orientated, by aiming at increasing benefits to the broader well-being social arena and environment sustainability. Indeed, the study revealed that within most participants, individual action had altruistic intentions to a broader audience than their own particular group or network. This was demonstrated by the homeless people

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involved in newsletter production (collective action to benefit as many Melbourne city-based homeless people as possible), and the mentoring action for commune groups (encouraging heightened community sensitivities to environmental issues and collectivist lifestyle skills).

These actions by the groups and networks bring about implications on what constitutes ‘social inclusion’ – and its ‘social exclusion’ antonym – beyond the existing government policy distinctions and mainstream lifeworld focus. Belonging to a community of any description often has deeper meaning to the individual and the ‘community’ in question than simply serving a means to satisfy basic needs of security, support, companionship, and the like. The ‘community’, as proposed by Castells, goes beyond physical boundaries and spatial definitions to be ‘substituted’ by social networks of communities defined as being either ‘real’ or ‘virtual’; the former as tangible interpersonal connections and the latter resulting from developments in information technology (2000:388). While all collectives in the study were fundamentally ‘real’ by their primary physical interactive function, with only the spiritual network and the long-term intentional community members extending some aspects of their interaction with others through the Internet, the interpersonal contact here has many similarities to what Castells presents as a virtual community. Thus while the tangible interpersonal interaction was ‘real’ in performance for many in the study, their innovation through collective action to operate ‘outside the square’ of mainstream systems placed them in an analogical space of ‘virtuality’ by virtue of their distance from the mainstream operational sphere.

In the main, direct communication and activeness with others was a primary consideration behind the function of these collectives, presenting them with ‘real’ alternatives in meeting personal and collective needs. Often these needs resulted from breakdowns within the broader social system and institutions to deliver satisfactorily – either formally or informally; this was certainly the case for those marginalized by their homelessness, their Aboriginality, their status as recently arrived refugees, their displacement from paid work, their family status as single parents, their damaged mental condition, and low income levels inhibiting affordable housing, and so on and so forth.

Living on the fringe involves alternative ‘real’ constructs of ‘personal communities’ evolving out of the mainstream dislocation through lifestyle choice options or economic-based circumstances. Yet, while the collectives provided a connecting point for meaning and need not found at the psychological moment elsewhere, there was no intention within any of the individuals involved in the study to sever ties with the broad societal structure. (However, it must be acknowledged that there were attempts to alter aspects of the dominant social condition, such as the public protest actions of certain associates connected with one intentional community). And in any case, how could they? Just as mainstream has at least some superficial choice in the manner to negotiate means to personally deal with global positives and negatives, so too do individuals on the fringe in coming to dignified terms with mainstream; the collectives are one medium that is useful in this regard.
Among the alternative collectives – particularly the urban communes – many participants sought a lifestyle that delivered a focused sociability both within and outside the collective membership. For example the long-term intentional community membership extended themselves into mainstream connections through largely part-time employment or interests that could be shared with mainstream associates, while intently modeling their lives collectively within a framework of heightened inter-personal relationships. The bowls club commune, although less formal in structure than their intentional community counterpart, also valued extended connectedness among their membership constellation. Their aspects of interaction with the broader community included artistic performance events and an organic community garden exercise, and these were devised to promote widely the possibilities of greater shared living experiences in suburbia. Thus, the urban intentional communities articulated a strengthening resolve in self-reliance for their respective memberships in outwardly contesting the normative of mainstream through their digression to it.

Building on trust for social determination consciousness

The form of social cohesion that transpires throughout collective relationships is critically based on mutual endeavor between the constituents with broad social implications. As noted earlier, ‘trust’ was a significant component of cohesiveness identified by participants as being a fundamental aspect of their forming associations with others. In describing the virtue of this resource in the context of the social being, Cox claims:

> Trust is a feeling about a relationship, based on ‘evidence’ from our own experiences – what we see, what others report, media examples, official policies – filtered through our expectations. We use examples to predict possible outcomes, and will selectively attend to those examples that tend to fit our predisposition.

(Cox, 1998:163)

These instances indicate that within both the marginal and the alternative collectives, the associations between the respective memberships was vitally important at a number of levels, and the contention here is that society overall benefits from this. The study demonstrated that mutual trust and solidarity provided opportunities for members of collectives to gain confidence through the supportiveness and shared identity with others. In many cases this generated a level of critical consciousness conviction where energies were applied for collective change action. This confidence in turn presented opportunities for the individuals to be active in directly dealing in many instances with situations perceived as oppressive, and transmitted into significant social extensions beyond the collective. Cox points out that civic and social trust may have greater relevance in ascertaining the state of health of the social systems and the well-being of the constituents, than the usual bandied social data such as school retention rates and household income (1998:157). The increasing concern for the effect of depression on Australians through such agencies as the Mental Health Council of Australia is a case in
point, as its very existence suggests that all is not well within the social order for a significant number of people. A more penetrative understanding on how a society of communities’ functions in overall cohesiveness would offer interesting insights into what matters as far as wellbeing is concerned, particularly where judgment accounts on the social elements are less connected than the normative of mainstream. A means to give some credence to the dynamics in collective social action that produces wellbeing would therefore be useful.

To find a way to explore ‘trust’ meaningfully in social analysis as a foundation for total social wellbeing is problematic. Cox acknowledges the difficulties and determines that comparative analysis “between organizations and groups that work well and those that do not” could offer a solution, and advocates a ‘social-capital audit’ capable of sensing social trust, tolerance of diversity for differences, and civic trust (Cox, 1998:165-166). Unfortunately, Cox’s essay implies focus towards more settled and formal arrangements of groups and organizations, rather than the less formal types largely found represented in the research project underpinning this paper. This suggests the fractured state of the fringe would not be considered, leaving a considerable void in community assessment; in consequence this would be unhelpful. Any audit must require a means to include the fragmented elements of the overall community. Also, the determination for groups and networks on what constitutes ‘working well’ as opposed to those that don’t, and the respective benefits to society overall, is fraught with value judgment pitfalls – an obstacle to many qualitative studies. This too would require framing of questions and evaluations that are sensitive to far-reaching and extensive points of view that are not limited to core values and sensitivities of the mainstream.

Such is the size of the problem in locating a reliable method of understanding the merits of collective action for the common good. Indications from the study revealed that trust was tantamount in importance for even the simplest forms of social bonding. What has been mounted so far in this discussion is that there is a critical level in trust of social bonding that should not be discounted in evaluating significance to social wellbeing within fringe collectives. A more meaningful understanding on social wellbeing would come from scrutinizing the parameters of the objectives being attempted through social bonding. This also means assessing the moral fortitude behind the decisive collective action being undertaken; however this too is extremely problematic for its value-loaded implications according to the judgmental eye of the beholder in such scrutiny. Nevertheless, the experience in the extensions of dialogue and action through collectives to promote mutual self-help and self-determination prospects is a critical advancement from conscious conviction. It is optimistically visionary action, akin to what Paul Clarke (1996) sees as the essence of ‘deep citizenship’, as opposed to state centred citizenship with its problematic status orientated boundaries, where a consciousness of “acting in and into a world” involves acknowledging that “identity of self and the identity of others is co-related and co-creative” (see Clarke 1996:2-6). This experience can be defined as social determination consciousness because of an intended common objective in advancement pursued collectively through a rationalized ‘conscientization’ of the social position.
Social determination consciousness – beyond the convention of ‘social capital’

The exploration into understanding the linkage between social connectedness and benefits to the broader social good has not gone unnoticed within the social science field, particularly over recent years. It has of course been noted that Robert Putnam in his reintroduction of the term ‘social capital’, also used ‘social cohesion’ and ‘social connectedness’ as meaning the same to ascribe a sense of understanding to the value of interaction flows that become the backbone to social order (refer Mowbray, 2004:43). On this popularly espoused term, Cox does make the point that social capital takes into account the energy involved in the increase of community capacities through collective action, unlike other forms of capital such as financial, human, and cultural capital:

Social capital is different conceptually because it deals with the social links which create society and cannot therefore be owned or depleted by use… Social capital measures processes, not outcomes or outputs.
(Cox, 1998:160)

Interestingly, the term received currency at government level as a phenomenon for its perceived significance in community aspirations and development. For example, in the ‘Forward’ to the Department for Victorian Communities’ 2002-2003 Annual Report, the department’s secretary noted the following:

The role for government in generating social capital is to create the opportunities for individuals to establish relationships and shared values; that is, to facilitate the creation of networks. The site for network creation is the local community, and community strengthening is the means to do so.
(Yehudi Blacher, cited in Mowbray, 2004:43)

However, what is clear from the study is significant associations have been formed between people without assistance from the formal systems and institutions of mainstream society. Indeed, public policy shortfalls have been the catalyst to infuse an opposing line of consciousness conviction within many collectives to seek palatable alternatives, demonstrated in the study by the functioning of the women’s meditation support group, the Aboriginal culture-health network, and the bowls club intentional community. The state inspired ‘governmentality’5 approach referred to above in social capital facilitation has not been the catalyst within the networks and groups contained in the study (except in the funding arrangements for the community and learning centre network); indeed in some cases formal civic systems and institutions hindered prospects of a developing empowerment process within at least one collective (men’s workshop support group) where introduced directives from the governing organizations collaboratively managing the program threatened the empowering base of those involved by redefining access eligibility. There is also the thought that governments are oblivious to the force of need for empowerment that many in the study strived for. Also, the shaping of what governments see as essential social capital is very much in the middle
Australia form of economic valued consumer orientation. What control (intervention in the name of ‘mediating social cohesion’) would the government place on certain of these self-help collectives if they objected to the particular focus on political grounds (for example, environmentally orientated groups noted for their opposition to government directions on sustainability). The contribution instead from the collectives in the study is a grounded action through social determination consciousness in either personal development with indirect benefits to the community overall or, more direct social-challenged development.

This discussion on dimensions of social cohesion per se then brings about another important point, and that is that the current notion of social capital is largely restricted in discussion to the public sphere constituted by conventional governance. Building on the work of Habermas, Nancy Fraser argues for a reworking of a new model of the ‘public sphere’, where an alternative form “is required to salvage that arena’s critical function and to institutionalise democracy” (Fraser, 1997:71). This is a model where the integrity of democracy adapts “to keep in view the distinctions between state apparatuses, economic markets, and democratic associations” (Fraser, 1997:70), and to move “toward an alternative, postbourgeois conception of the public sphere” (Fraser, 1997:72). What can be gleamed from the self-help approach by those in the study concentrated on here – largely from the alternative fringe – provided a sense of ‘ownership’ for the issue that the collectives attempted to address, and in doing so functioned separate to the domain of the state and mainstream ‘civil society’. Civil society relates to spheres of activity in citizenry participation not directly entwined with the state and the market (Farrar, 1996; Kenny, 1999, Bessant et al, 2006). To discern further the parameters of civil society in this instance, Cox offers guidance where she expresses civil society as being:

… the public space, actual and metaphorical, where we can meet, debate, claim rights, fulfil obligations, and so on. It is this format – not the space between the institutions of the state, community and market but the broad frame – which allows these and other institutions to function.

(Cox, 2000:76)

Yet this is not the context of where the fringe is functioning. It is not private space because of the interactive condition of their collective association, but nor is it absolutely public in the civil society sense because of the mainstream detachment. Thus civic periphery is a condition to consider in community development rhetorical extensions such as ‘community capacity building’ lying within the public sphere (refer Wiseman, 2004:59-60), but outside the formal civic arena of social order with its market-orientated preoccupations.

Fringe groups and networks act in ways that serve to extend other understandings and possibilities of social order, and therefore demand recognition for this. The study demonstrated that it would be valuable to probe into the social psychology of the community where deficiencies in attachment to mainstream exist. For what has been identified is the extensive resolve in bolstering social endeavors by many individual

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participants of the collectives. Thus there is merit in considering theoretical analysis as purported through social capital theory as being able to contribute further to understand the contextual nature of our daily lives. However, this involves a strong need to understand the very essence of how the broader community – including those on the fringe - comprehends ‘what we are doing’ in Arendt’s terms, and how we feel about it. Accounting for social determination consciousness would help achieve this. Extending democratic capabilities beyond market interpretations relies on this.

**Responsibility beyond market citizenship**

These are ‘real’ (as opposed to ‘virtual’) connections generated among the fringe to create distinctive means to the way they go about their lives. They are associations built on trust and mutual support and respect in the interaction with their close associates. In many cases theirs is not the distilled connection of life meted by the media and its portrayal of popular culture with subliminal ‘demands’ for materialistic gratification, nor the political assumptions in leadership of socio-economic conventions that inflict a determined course of lifestyle and life journey idealism. These people see their lives socially and psychologically distanced in difference. Some follow a path of consciousness and concern for the lifeworld environment that has long been neglected – even disregarded – by the dominant culture, while others rebuild personal worlds from their fractured connections to it. They reconstruct their lives for meaning shared in episodic states with others within satellite domains of mainstream. Theirs is a collective endeavor of self-help and social wellbeing across many reflective domains beyond market citizenship.

These are social systems that have a moral base, but not of the infrastructure ‘social glue’ that Amitai Etzioni (refer Crow, 2002) – among others – complain is lost by the adoption of American styled consumerism (refer Pahl, 1996:88). However, the fringe collectives – as episodic as they may be – are ‘social lubricants’ assisting dynamics of support and self-help to counter mainstream shortcomings. In a majority of the cases portrayed in the study, these lubricants eased transformations into action directed towards reorganization of individual approaches to oppressive social conditions. It is this form of social organization that has a powerful role in drawing out extensions of the individual into social determination consciousness which allows a greater understanding on citizenship forms.
NOTES

1. This paper reports in part on the findings from the PhD research undertaken by the author.

2. The ‘fringe’ and ‘mainstream’ concept helps to distinguish in broad terms two general life experience positions between social groups according to social status. Building critically on the Jürgen Habermas concept of the private and public sphere, Nancy Fraser argues for recognition of multiple, or plural, competing arenas for the public sphere (1997). Habermas used the private and public sphere concept to distinguish between the duties of the home and family, and the social extensions where people engage in public debate and discussion as equals. The public sphere from Fraser’s viewpoint expands on this approach to consider “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses” (1997:81). Thus, presented in this paper is a broad conceptual notion of two distinct public spheres expressed as ‘mainstream’ and ‘fringe’, ‘dominant’ and ‘subordinate’, and ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’.

3. Attempts were made to bring some uniformity to relevant issues between the collectives across each interview round. This was undertaken by conducting three rounds of interview sessions with a majority of the participants in stages for all collectives; the program was conducted over a twenty-month period beginning in November 2000 and finalised in June 2002. The purpose of this interview program technique was to enable reflections of issues from the collectives to be assessed after each interview round prior to moving on to the next round to ascertain common themes or other significant issues. Holding the research participants together across the total duration of the interview process presented several management issues. One of the major factors rested with an attrition rate caused by the disruption of associations within collectives among some of those interviewed.

4. Other commentators also acknowledge an apparent increase in the usage of the term ‘un-Australian’. One commentator noting the term to ascribe ‘blameworthiness’, considered it unhelpful and equated it with McCarthyism as an “ugly word and a signpost to an ugly trend” (Hugh McKay, ‘Just who is un-Australian?’ The Age, 20 June 2005).

5. The term ‘governmentality’ refers to state organizational approaches in control and influence over behaviour of social actors. It has been described by Rob Watts building on Michel Foucault’s work as “about the constitution of
abstract yet real systems of integration and management of activities over increasingly abstracted time and space” (1993/4:147). Watts further explains:

… Foucault insisted that the term ‘governmentality’ apply generally to all projects or practices intending to direct social actors to behave in a particular manner and towards specified ends in which political government is but one of the means of regulating or directing action. (Watts, 1993/4, footnote on page 109)
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