

5 Aboriginal employment and unemployment: colonised labour

By **BILL THORPE** from **BEYOND INDUSTRIAL SOCIOLOGY, THE WORK OF MEN AND WOMEN (1992)** North Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

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Few industrial sociology or industrial relations studies of Australian labour markets or the various forms of 'work' in our society consider the employment history and labour patterns of Australia's indigenous people.* Indeed, there are relatively few studies of Aboriginal employment per se and only one full-scale study of Aboriginal labour: the Berndts' survey of Aboriginal pastoral workers in the Northern Territory during the mid-1940s (Berndt and Berndt, 1987; but see also McGrath, 1987 and Stevens, 1974). This chapter therefore represents an attempt to incorporate Aboriginal employment in the Australian industrial sociology and industrial relations literature.

An examination of Aboriginal labour patterns and the related matters of unemployment and underemployment are important for several reasons. First, as noted above, no industrial sociology text or account of the Australian labour market can claim to cover work and management issues seriously if Aboriginal workers are left out. Secondly, the presence of Australia's indigenous people and their descendants in labour market studies places accounts of other Australian-based workers (i.e. Australian-born non-Aboriginal workers, and more recent migrant workers) in an Australian context. In other words, while non-Aboriginal workers may share features in common with employees in other countries, the presence of Aborigines, and Australia's colonial history in relation to them, distinguishes the non-Aboriginal labour market in significant ways.

* Here it should be noted that Aboriginal people recommend that 'Aborigine' be used as a singular noun, 'Aborigines' as the plural noun and 'Aboriginal' as the adjective. Aborigines in the south-east of South Australia increasingly prefer terms like 'Aboriginal people' rather than 'Aborigines'. Also Aboriginal people are increasingly referring to themselves not so much as 'Aborigines' but as 'Nungas' (South Australia) or 'Murriss' (Queensland). Accordingly these conventions will be followed (*Mar the Cockatoo*, 1991:11; Mattingly and Hampson, 1988:xv).

This chapter therefore will proceed along the following lines. To begin with, to understand the current position of Aboriginal people in the labour market requires an understanding of Australian history since non-Aboriginal invasion, and patterns of Aboriginal employment and unemployment during this time. This process is the result of Australian-based colonialism and its links to various forms of economic and cultural imperialism, chiefly British. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge Aboriginal resistances: resistances to the prevailing Protestant work ethic; to evangelical and other kinds of Christianity; to economic exploitation. One must also acknowledge Aboriginal people's attempts to maintain deeply held spiritual beliefs linked to material life; and the sheer effort to survive as a people in the face of a powerful, alien culture. Thirdly, a concept of 'colonised labour' will be developed, as a means of explaining the realities of Aboriginal labour patterns, and to distinguish these from other kinds of workers, e.g. migrant or 'ethnic' workers, in the Australian context. Here colonised labour resembles slavery although it contains some important differences. And finally, an assessment of current trends in Aboriginal employment and unemployment will be set out, based on some of the most recent published data.

HISTORY AND CHARACTERISTICS OF ABORIGINAL EMPLOYMENT

From the outset of the British colonisation of Aboriginal Australia (including the establishment of the military and convict settlement at Sydney Cove in 1788, and South Australia's foundation as a 'free' capitalist colony in 1836), Australia's 750 000 indigenous people (Mulvaney and White, 1987:117) were confronted with at least two colonising pressures: the demand for land and its resources, and the demand for labour. For a number of reasons, the British colonisers initially, and the waves of non-Aboriginal immigrants subsequently, required Aboriginal land rather more than Aboriginal labour (Jennett, 1983:123). In the first place, the British, as the major maritime and commercial power, claimed the Australian continent for the British State; extended British hegemony in the region to forestall imperial rivals (chiefly the French); consolidated and expanded important trading links with India, the Far East and the Pacific; and resumed large-scale transportation (i.e. banishing convicts to a new site of exile). Secondly, by the 1830s and 1840s, Australian-based pastoralists had firmly established their hold on the landscape, had assumed control over the colonial legislatures and, with their flocks of sheep, had become the most important source of wool supplies for the burgeoning British woollen industry (McMichael, 1984).

This development, which involved an often murderous struggle with Aboriginal clans, lasted from before the 1820s in south-eastern Australia, including Tasmania, to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the remoter parts of the continent such as the northern regions of Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. This spread of pastoralism (the grazing of sheep and cattle) on such a vast scale was the single most effective force which expropriated the land from Aboriginal people (Ryan, 1981:83–100; Evans, Saunders and Cronin, 1988:33–46; Rowley, 1972:157–221; Pope, 1989:74–85).

Secondly, an immigrant society, by definition, brings its own labour. In eastern Australia (including present-day New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania), a significant element of such labour was the forced migration of some 160 000 convicts. Convicts and ex-convicts were a major component of the pastoral workforce until the 1850s, and in this period, some 90 per cent of wool-growing expenses were committed to such labour costs (McMichael, 1984:129). In the 1850s, the gold rushes in New South Wales and Victoria especially, stimulated free migration, mainly British, on an unprecedented scale. Thus the colonisers of Australia—both those who ran the colony from London and those in the Australian colonies themselves—and the many thousands of working- and middle-class immigrants had no pressing need to utilise Aboriginal workers, unlike the situation in other British colonies such as India and Africa.

Thirdly, both the British imperial and the Australian colonial governments (the State) upheld the concept of absolute and exclusive property rights over the Aborigines' 'right of occupancy only in land' (Attwood, 1990:131). In other words, Aboriginal use of the land, the very basis of their cultures, religion and social organisation was deemed inferior to British and European notions of property. The legal aspects of this vexed question are not clear cut (see Reynolds, 1987a:133–61; Reynolds, 1987b:7–29 and King, 1986). But the common non-Aboriginal viewpoint was that Aboriginal people were nomadic, possessed no recognisable system of government or religion, had few if any goods worthy of trade and, most damning of all, had failed to cultivate the land along agricultural lines. The fact that title to waste land (i.e. unfenced land, with few residents) in Britain 'was as secure as the title to the best farm land'; and that 'English gentlemen' possessed their hunting grounds (Reynolds, 1987b:19–20), and that only half of Britain itself was farmed, seemed to escape the notice of those who condemned Aboriginal people.

Fourthly, McCorquodale has documented the legislation, court decisions, discriminatory employment practices and trade union ambivalence which denied employment to Aborigines and subverted industrial justice to those who did gain employment. The legislation

included the 1842 *Breach of Contract Act* which was used with the 1849 *Aboriginal Native Offenders Act* 'to provide a whipping of up to two dozen lashes in lieu of or in addition to imprisonment' if an Aboriginal worker objected to his/her employment conditions or who absconded (McCorquodale, 1985:8); the *Wine, Beer and Spirit Sale Act* (1880) in Western Australia which allowed any person to give liquor to Aboriginal people in place of wages; the 1895 *Defences Act of South Australia* which prohibited Aboriginal people from enrolling in the defence forces; the 1901 *Post and Telegraph Act* which restricted mail contracts to non-Aboriginal labour, despite the fact that Aboriginal men and women had been employed for a hundred years throughout Australia as messengers; the *Workmen's Compensation Ordinance* of 1923 in the Northern Territory, which excluded Aboriginal people from receiving workers' compensation, even though they comprised the backbone of the pastoral industry, the Territory's most important at the time.

The Arbitration Court, according to Stevens, had excluded Aboriginal people from its jurisdiction by default (1974:190), although the definition of 'employee' in the *Conciliation and Arbitration Act* of 1904–64, Section 4, did not in itself exclude Aborigines. Rather, those with the power to fix wages decided that Aboriginal employees need not be included under the award (Rowley, 1972:328). Complicating the determination of wage payment for Aboriginal workers after the establishment of conciliation and arbitration procedures in the early 1900s were individual federal, state and Territory legislation, policy and practices. In Queensland, for example, Aboriginal workers received a minimum wage which was generally higher than that paid in the Northern Territory, but, under the terms of the 1897 *Aborigines' Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* and subsequent amendments, had their wages banked in a Trust Fund. Effectively this was controlled by the Protectors and Directors of the relevant government departments; and Aboriginal people in Queensland as recently as the 1970s had to sign their names to obtain any money from the fund (*The Queensland Aborigines Act and Regulations 1971*, 1976:21–2).

Underlying much of this was a widespread, although not universal practice, from the earliest period of colonial contact, of not paying wages at all for Aboriginal labour. Even when wages were paid, officials and employers in charge of Aboriginal workers and their families, in most cases paid their employees an 'Aboriginal' minimum rate, considerably lower than the non-Aboriginal male rate. In some cases, for example in the Northern Territory, the Chief Protector, under Regulation 14 of The Aborigines Ordinance 1918–43, had the power to exempt an employer from 'payment of any wages' to an Aboriginal person maintaining 'relatives and dependants' (Berndt

and Berndt, 1987:13). In other words, this contradicted the principle laid down by Justice Higgins in his *Harvester* judgement of 1907, which established a minimum basic wage to enable a non-Aboriginal male wage-earner and his family to 'live in frugal comfort' (McQueen, 1983:145).

In such a context, trade union support for Aboriginal workers was equivocal. On the one hand, the fact that employers and the State paid Aborigines lower wages (when they paid them at all) was an implicit challenge to trade unions' aims to achieve the highest wages possible for their non-Aboriginal members. For this reason, in 1924 for example, the Northern Territory Workers' Union tried to limit the number of Aboriginal people employed on cattle stations (Stevens, 1974:190). At the same time, it was in the interests of the unions to raise their membership and recruit Aboriginal workers to their organisations. In Queensland the Australian Workers' Union did this, and after World War I pressed for equal pay. However, as noted before, as Aboriginal employees came under particular employment conditions (the 1919 'Aboriginals' Employment Regulations), the Queensland Chief Protector J.W. Bleakley prevailed on 'both union and management in the pastoral industry' to accept a 'special' wage rate for Aboriginal workers 'at approximately two-thirds that' of the Award (Rowley, 1972:255).

Additional factors which inhibited union involvement in efforts to improve working conditions for Aboriginal employees, particularly in the Northern Territory from the 1930s to the 1960s, included employer fears that the presence of trade unions would stir Aboriginal resentment against both the employers themselves and their working conditions; and loosen the colonial hold the pastoral employers had over their Aboriginal labour force, where the latter virtually lived out their lives on the stations 'as dependants of the management' (Rowley, 1972:277). Along with such attitudes went the view that Aborigines could not be paid cash wages, or if they were, employers would threaten to expel them.

As a result, ambiguity abounded in union campaigns, employer practices and arbitration court rulings. In 1928, the North Australian Workers' Union tried to have Aboriginal workers included in the award on equal terms. This was not so much a campaign for equal pay as a ploy by the union to make employers hire non-Aboriginal labour, on the assumption that, if equal wages were paid, 'preference would be given to Europeans'. The Arbitration Court rejected the union claim, arguing that the intention of the unionists was to exclude Aboriginal employment (Larbalestier, 1988:28). In 1932 the Arbitration Court ruled that, as the federal award did not mention Aboriginal people and as they could not join the Australian Workers' Union, they were excluded. The situation persisted in legal decisions

in the 1940s. In 1948 the union applied to have award rates paid to Aboriginal employees in the pastoral industry, but the Arbitration Commission denied the claim on the grounds that it did not have the power to cover Aborigines in the Cattle Station Industry (Northern Territory) Award (Stevens, 1974:191), and that the Commission could not interfere with an agreement between the pastoral employers and the Northern Territory administration (Rowley, 1972:338).

It was not until 1965 that Aboriginal pastoral workers gained equal pay, and this ruling did not take effect until three years later, largely because the pastoralists insisted that the Arbitration Commission insert the so-called 'slow worker' clause, thus subjecting Aboriginal employees to lower pay rates (Stevens, 1974:205). This clause, in Section 48 of the *Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Act* 1904-64 was based on the pastoralists' case that Aborigines were less efficient than European workers (Broome, 1982:140). The Commission accepted this claim despite strong evidence to the contrary; indeed, it did not examine a great deal of evidence at all, and that which it did accept—chiefly anthropological—rested on 'flimsy grounds' (Stevens, 1974:199). McCorquodale concludes that these and other examples of discrimination were not 'accidents' but 'deliberate, premeditated, systematic, coherent provisions enunciated as official decrees and implemented by the organs of the State and representative bodies of employer and employee alike', whose foundation was 'malevolent and racist, not innocent and certainly not ignorant' (1985:16).

The effect of the processes just described was to marginalise Aboriginal people from, rather than integrate them into, the dominant non-Aboriginal economy. In other words, Australian Aboriginal 'unemployment' was a built-in feature of Australian economic history and had less to do with individual Aboriginal characteristics. At the same time, and for a variety of reasons, Aborigines were employed throughout the colonial period and beyond, and played a much more significant role both as workers and as agents who enabled colonisation to proceed, than most other accounts have acknowledged.

To begin with, the pastoral industry, one of Australia's most important, has always required Aboriginal labour until the very recent past (Berndt and Berndt, 1987). The very fact of the colonising process, which mainly took place on the pastoral frontiers in increasingly remote areas, deterred immigrants and their families from venturing far from urban centres into the 'bush'. Consequently, pastoral employers sometimes had great difficulty procuring non-Aboriginal labour, particularly on the larger and more distant properties in the interior. The great value of Aborigines as employees, potential or actual, to the employer was the fact that Aboriginal clans belonged to 'their' country and were, for deeply held cultural and religious

reasons, tied to it. Thus there was always a reservoir of labour at hand if other kinds were unavailable, although this varied depending on the state of relations between pastoral invader and Aboriginal group.

Furthermore, as gatherers and hunters, Aboriginal people were only *partially* nomadic. It was the immigrants and their domestic animals such as sheep, cattle, dogs, horses, cats and goats, who were the real nomads, travelling from Britain and Europe to Australia and from colony to colony, urban centre to urban centre, urban centre to country and back again, in search of material wealth or at least modest fortune. The gold rushes were a classic example, and it was during periods such as this, when the non-Aboriginal male workforce left for the goldfields, that Aboriginal workers came into their own. They remained on the properties, shepherding, sheepwashing and shearing, which enabled the woolgrowers to survive and prosper. Otherwise, as in South Australia, 'the struggling colony would have collapsed' (Pope, 1988:14).

Thirdly, with their profound knowledge of their material environment and their skills in negotiating it, Aboriginal people were invaluable guides to explorers, pastoralists, miners and others who wished to exploit the economic resources of this continent (Reynolds, 1981:164). In some cases, for example in the colonial Queensland timber industry or the clearing of native animals from the land so that sheepowners could graze more stock, Aboriginal men were hired precisely for their skills (Thorpe, 1986). Even the fatal business of crushing Aboriginal resistance to non-Aboriginal occupation, especially in Victoria and Queensland, could not have happened without the decisive intervention of the Native Police forces, consisting of Aboriginal troopers and non-Aboriginal officers (Evans, Saunders and Cronin, 1988:55-66; Critchett, 1990:157-74).

Fourthly, despite settler-colonial views to the contrary, Aboriginal people proved themselves more than useful and willing workers for their new masters. Hamilton argues that it was 'universally expected' that Aborigines would supply labour shortages; that there were indications of periodic Aboriginal employment in a number of sources, and that, on occasions, it was 'highly regarded' (Hamilton, 1987:133). In particular, the work of Aboriginal women for non-Aboriginal employers is now receiving the attention it deserves. As Huggins observes, 'Black women performed a wider range of jobs than their European counterparts: they mustered cattle, went droving, acted as shepherds, worked at road and fence building and repairing' (1987/8:11). As women, moreover, they were 'buffers' as well as links between Aboriginal men and non-Aboriginal station people, subject to demands for sex, as well as for labour (Berndt and Berndt, 1987:119; McGrath, 1987:51). Indeed, a contemporary opinion in the 1920s

was that the Aboriginal woman was 'one of the greatest of the pioneers of the Territories' (Berndt and Berndt, 1987:9).

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ABORIGINAL EMPLOYMENT AND THE CONCEPT OF COLONISED LABOUR

One of the striking features about 'Aboriginal' labour until quite recent times as noted before was how unusual it was to reward it with wage payment. In 1911 for example, Aboriginal women (Nunga women) working on pastoral stations in South Australia did not receive wages (Mattingly and Hampson 1988:129). More recently, in the 1940s, Aboriginal people were receiving only rations for their labour on cattle properties. And when they did receive wages, with some exceptions, they were generally a fraction of the non-Aboriginal male rate.

The second striking element of work performed by Aborigines—and one still quite apparent when one examines the most recent published data—is how deeply related it is to class, caste and race. Huggins, in her study of Queensland Aboriginal (Murri) women domestic workers, notes that they never handled meat or assisted with the making of food like bread and scones (1987/8:11). In other words these people were defined as 'untouchables'. In this connection it is worth noting how non-Aboriginal men sexually propositioned lighter-skinned Aboriginal women far more than darker-skinned women; while non-Aborigines divided Aboriginal men and women into gradated status and occupational categories depending on skin colour (Huggins, 1987/8:17). As the survey of employment later in this chapter shows, Aboriginal workers of both genders are disproportionately situated in occupations which are working-class, with little scope for occupational and social mobility.

A third, salient characteristic of labour performed by Aborigines was, and still is, its insecure and itinerant qualities. As the Berndts put it, 'the services of an Aboriginal could be commandeered or dispensed with at will, regardless of his or her desires or capabilities' (1987:109). The roots of this can be traced to the colonial processes described earlier; the wholesale removal of Aboriginal people to segregated reserves and isolated regions which confined them to a narrow range of jobs; the increasing availability of, and preference for, non-Aboriginal labour, and the location of most Aboriginal people in areas which generally offer less secure, less remunerative employment.

Fourthly and most importantly, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal writers have typified the above aspects and Aboriginal labour in

general as a form of slavery (Mattingly and Hampson, 1988:129; Evans, 1984:188–201; Kennedy, 1985:24; Huggins 1987/8:21; Sykes, 1989:65, 73), while others have variously described Aboriginal work conditions as constituting a 'feudal' environment, feudal colonial-style relations (Berndt and Berndt, 1987:124), or an example of 'quasi-slave status' (Saunders, 1982:xvii).

The most sustained attempt to define Aboriginal labour as a form of slavery is Evans' Queensland study which draws on the work of sociologist Orlando Patterson. Evans argues that Australian Aborigines conformed to several crucial criteria which define the slave condition. As described previously, one of the necessary preconditions for slavery is the pattern of force which 'expelled Aborigines from traditional land usage and compelled them . . . to work for the new proprietor, (Evans, 1984:188). This by itself distinguished Aboriginal 'workers' from all others, even convicts. Secondly, in numerous instances on the frontier, the armed landtakers had the power of life and death over those whose 'country' they were occupying. An Aboriginal survivor or captive was therefore literally someone spared from death.

As Evans puts it, 'the Aboriginal worker and the vanquished survivor of such battles were one and the same' (Evans, 1984:189). This, and the continued threat and sometimes the use of violence, underlined the powerlessness of the Aboriginal worker and hence his or her slave condition. Thirdly, the slave is someone captured and taken from kinsfolk—the condition of 'natal alienation' (Evans, 1984:196). Fourthly, the slave, unlike the ordinary wage worker or even an indentured or contract worker, was 'wholly propertyless' (Evans, 1984:201). And finally, the slave is a person 'without honour', i.e. someone who does not belong to the legitimate social or moral community, a degraded person (Patterson, 1984:90).

These arguments are compelling, particularly when other locations and situations in more recent times are examined. For example, at Birrundudu, a pastoral outstation of Gordon Downs owned by Vestey's in the 1940s, Aboriginal men who refused to allow non-Aboriginal men to use their wives and daughters for sexual or other purposes were quite powerless to prevent the women being taken away (Berndt and Berndt, 1987:117). And, as recently as 1979 in the Queensland/New South Wales border town of Mungindi, an employer had chained some of his Aboriginal employees under a house (personal communication with Bill Robertson).

At the same time, given the colonial history of this issue described earlier, there is a good case for claiming that Aboriginal employment and its present manifestations, however attenuated today, are a *variant* or derivation of slavery, or a related but distinct form, i.e. *colonised* labour.

The basic patterns of colonised labour can be set out as follows.

Firstly as noted earlier, colonised labour derives from the processes of imperialism and colonialism, which is the seizure of a territory and its people by a major power (usually a nation state or politico-economic interests on behalf of the nation), in order to dominate and exploit the colonised territory and its people economically, politically and culturally. In this process, the basic social relationship between the dominant 'cultural-ethnic group' and the subordinate groups or peoples is usually racist: 'the worldwide relationship between "black" and "white" that imperialism brought in its train' (Omvedt, 1973:4). In the modern period, i.e. since the non-Aboriginal colonisation of Aboriginal Australia, colonialism also represents one way in which the conditions necessary for capitalism are created from 'non-capitalist modes' (McEachern, 1982:9) such as the Aboriginal economy. Thus the situation facing Aboriginal people since non-Aboriginal occupation has been a classic case of colonialism.

Secondly because it is a direct outcome of colonialism, colonised labour is therefore subordinate to all other forms of labour. While it is the case that migrant workers were and are exploited, and while they (especially migrant women) occupy some of the poorest paid and most onerous jobs in the Australian economy (e.g. food processing, assembly line work) they have not been colonised. As Lever-Tracy and Quinlan have argued, despite considerable racial and ethnic antagonism directed against them, not least from Anglo-Celtic workers, immigrant workers have become part of Australia's institutional organisations, specifically the 'pervasive system of job regulation in the form of compulsory arbitration, and the closely related maturity of the Australian union movement' (1988:163). As pointed out in chapter 9, by contrast, it was more than 60 years after compulsory arbitration was introduced that Aboriginal workers were included in its awards. Moreover, as Hassan and Tan point out in their socio-economic study of Asian migrants in Australia, 'all migrant groups . . . receive more opportunities for social, economic and cultural advancement than do' Australian Aborigines (Hassan and Tan, 1990:41).

Thirdly, the colonial relationship (and particularly the social relations of production between colonial masters and colonised workers), like slavery, is suffused with force and the repressive elements of power much more overtly than the social relations of production typical of wage labour. As the Berndts point out, the European employer had the 'privilege' of using 'physical violence to assert his authority' (1987:120).

Fourthly, the colonial situation, in the Australian case if not elsewhere, renders the colonised worker both desirable and undesirable as a source of labour. This is because the colonisers, as mentioned previously, want to exploit the land and resources of the colonised most of all. As a result, indigenous peoples, like North America's

Indian peoples or Australia's Aboriginal people, particularly if their cultural and material life is at odds with the colonisers, are an impediment to economic development. Moreover, in other colonial situations, for example in India and Africa where the colonisers and their allies were and remained a small minority, indigenous labour was essential for the exploitation of economic resources; as a market for manufactured goods from the colonising powers; and the maintenance of colonial societies. In addition, these indigenes comprised the vast majority of the population, so they still occupied most of the land and its resources. By contrast, in North America and Australia, the indigenes became and remain a small minority, alienated from their land and largely displaced as labour by immigrants. As such they never assumed real importance as a market for western goods. An important consequence of these processes and others, for instance racial stereotyping, is that unemployment and underemployment become integral features of the colonised labour condition. This helps to explain why Aboriginal people have the highest rates of unemployment of any group in the workforce.

Thus colonised labour can be distinguished from slavery, notwithstanding the parallels between them. The slave worker is always *valued* for his or her labour, as labour. The country or region where the slave comes from is of lesser importance, except where the resources of the country and the indigenous population is much greater than the colonising population, as was the case, for example, in India and the former European colonies in Africa. Thus the slave can be transported to other countries altogether, to be exploited as a form of labour in an alien system of production. And while the slave undergoes severe punishment from time to time at the hands of the master (like the colonised worker), and represents a form of private property in the person (like some Aboriginal workers), the value of slave labour to the slave owner is such that, firstly it comprises an 'investment of capital in human resources' (Saunders, 1982:xvii) and, secondly, it is constantly employed. Consequently the slave, at least in certain slave systems, is provided with 'moderate protection' (Saunders, 1982:xvii) and the means of material support necessary for the slave to perform constant and often heavy field work.

Clearly, the social conditions of plantation slavery varied considerably, but these paternalistic and coercive work regimes were geared to reproduce, through slave families on the plantations themselves, a recurrent source of labour power, quite unlike the situation on Australia's Northern Territory and Western Australian cattle properties. On these properties in the mid-1940s, with some exceptions, pastoralists employing colonised Aboriginal workers forced them to go 'walkabout' in search of food, provided very poor

quality rations (dry bread, offal, few if any vegetables), and made almost no effort to improve the social conditions which led to the rapidly declining birthrate at the time. The response of local Australian managers of Vestey's properties to the resulting long-term labour shortages was to induce Aboriginal people from more remote areas to camp at these stations (Berndt and Berndt, 1987:32) rather than reproduce the labour force on the properties themselves. In contrast to slavery, therefore, the colonised worker is alternately valued as a labour commodity but also devalued, employed and unemployed, paid but mostly unpaid, integrated but mostly marginalised.

The foregoing discussion is crucial to understanding the present situation of Aboriginal employment and unemployment, the focus of the next, final section. As Sykes points out, 'the history of the Black community, dispossessed and disfranchised, is the main reason few Blacks are seen today as contributors to the economy by way of employment' (Sykes, 1989:80). Except for some Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory and elsewhere who still have strong, demonstrable cultural-material ties to their land, the majority of Aboriginal people and their descendants, forced to live elsewhere, have little access to property, inherited wealth or material assets, most of which are in the hands of non-Aborigines (Sykes, 1989:81). If Aboriginal people had been compensated financially, the story may have been different. Specifically, as the following analysis indicates, the relative lack of capital and private wealth among Aboriginal people helps to explain the very low proportion of Aborigines who are employers or owners of small businesses; and it explains the uneven and limited employment experience they had, and continue to have in the private sector (Sykes, 1989:81).

It is not the whole story. What Alexander has rightly typified as the decidedly 'uncapitalist' norms pervading Aboriginal cultures (1984:239) must be taken into account; rejection of western acquisitiveness, possessiveness, competitiveness, money making, the failure to share material wealth, and the sometimes oppressive expectations on non-Aboriginal children to 'succeed' in lucrative careers. Nevertheless this type of explanation must not be exaggerated or used as a means to justify gross inequalities in housing, sanitation, health, education, civil rights or employment opportunities. Most Aboriginal people today do not live in the 'country' of their forebears or in so-called 'traditional' non-western communities, but in and around Australia's major and provincial cities and rural towns. For example, in 1986 there were more Aboriginal people (29 848) living in Sydney and Brisbane than in most of the Northern Territory (29 198) excluding Darwin (ABS: Census 86, Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People: 3). Most Aborigines, therefore, have to survive and operate in this predominantly non-, indeed anti-Aboriginal

economy and society and are thus subject, more than most non-Aboriginal Australians to the fluctuations and changes of this economy and society.

What follows draws on 1986 census data, published and unpublished, other studies, and my own observations on Aboriginal employment patterns. The first section is an analysis of unemployment and labour force participation rates. I focus on unemployment to begin with, to indicate the gravity of circumstances most Aboriginal people face in their daily lives and because it is a continued manifestation of the process of colonisation referred to earlier.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS: UNEMPLOYMENT AND PARTICIPATION RATES

As a means of coming to grips with the Aboriginal labour market and other features of it, figures on Aboriginal unemployment and participation rates will be drawn from two 1986 census data bases: that of South Australia and Australia as a whole, and Ross' study of the Aboriginal labour market in non-metropolitan New South Wales during 1986 and 1987 (ABS, *Aboriginals in South Australia, Census Bb*; ABS, *Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Census 86*; Ross, 1989). The latter account is based on access to Aboriginal communities, and is more likely to reflect the true state of affairs in those regions surveyed. However, Ross' sample covers only 677 working age Aborigines, whereas the Census is an attempt to account for the 66 000 Aboriginal people it calculated to be in the labour force in 1986 (ABS, *Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Census 86:21*).

In South Australia, according to the Census of 1986, the average unemployment rate among Aboriginal people was 34.5 per cent, compared with 9.6 per cent for the total (non-Aboriginal) population. Unemployment was highest in 'other urban' regions (43.2 per cent) then the major urban centres (36.7 per cent) with 22.2 per cent for non-urban areas (ABS, *Aboriginals in South Australia, Census 86:20*). For Australia as a whole, according to the Census, 35 per cent of Aboriginal people in the labour force were unemployed 'compared to the national unemployment rate of 9 per cent' (ABS, *Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Census 86:21*). By contrast, Ross reported unemployment rates among Aboriginal men in non-metropolitan New South Wales of 75.9 per cent and among Aboriginal women of 65.3 per cent. 'Male unemployment rates were in excess of 70 per cent in all regions while there was considerable variation in the female rates' (Ross, 1989:41).

There are at least three reasons for the significant differences

in these results. Firstly, as Ross points out, the 1986 census figures 'cover all Aborigines aged 15 and over irrespective of their place of residence', whereas the figures Ross presents 'cover only those Aborigines living in country New South Wales aged 15 to 64' (Ross, 1989:33). Secondly, Aboriginal people living in rural areas are located in economic zones which have higher rates of unemployment, or at least a much more limited range of jobs than urban centres, particularly the major cities. For example, in rural New South Wales, the most common work available to Aboriginal people is seasonal labour in the fruit and vegetable-growing areas, and cotton harvesting (Sykes, 1989:67). Thirdly, the census represents an average figure, which by definition collapses both higher and lower rates of unemployment into an aggregate percentage. The national average of 9–10 per cent unemployment for the non-Aboriginal paid workforce does not reflect regional, ethnic, gender or age variations, or types of industry. Moreover, for the reasons outlined earlier, census findings are likely to understate the real position.

Nevertheless, no published study, official or otherwise, exists to suggest that Aboriginal unemployment is anything less than 3 times the rate than that for non-Aborigines (ABS, *Aboriginals in South Australia, Census 86:26*). Australian Aboriginal people, particularly those aged 15–24, have far higher rates of unemployment than non-Aboriginal Australians, including recent immigrants from Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. The unemployment rates in the mid-1980s for immigrants who arrived in Australia after 1960 were UK/Ireland 7.5 per cent; New Zealand 10.9 per cent; Italy 8.9 per cent; Greece 13.2 per cent; Yugoslavia 18.2 per cent; Lebanon 32.1 per cent and Vietnam 32.7 per cent (Tait and Gibson, 1987:8). A more recent study indicates that unemployment among Vietnamese-born people is in the region of 24–25 per cent (Hugo, 1990:202), which suggests that the rate, while still high, may be falling. One difference, however, between Vietnamese-born people and Australian Aborigines, determining entry into the labour market, is that the former face major difficulties because of language difficulties (i.e. inability to speak English fluently) whereas Aboriginal people, in the main, are fluent in this respect. This observation is not meant in any way to diminish the very real problems Vietnamese-born and all non-English speaking immigrants face, but it does point to other factors determining Aboriginal people's relationships to the labour market, notably the legacy of a colonial past, discussed previously.

According to both published and unpublished census data 'about 66 000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were in the labour force' (ABS, *Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Census 86:21*). Of this number, 41 887 were men and 24 400 were women (ABS, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged 15 years*

and over, occupation by income, by sex, Abstat 15). The 'labour force' means those who are both employed and unemployed. These figures represent a labour force participation rate of 51 per cent overall (66 per cent for men and 36 per cent for women), somewhat lower than that for non-Aboriginal Australian employees which is 61 per cent overall (75 per cent for men and 48 per cent for women) (ABS, Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Census 86:21). Ross' study presents an almost identical average result of 54 per cent (73 per cent for men and 35 per cent for women) (Ross, 1989:31).

Comparisons can be made with immigrants, all non-English speaking immigrants, and the Vietnamese-born. The average labour force participation rates among all immigrants is 61 per cent; all non-English speaking immigrants 58 per cent; and among the Vietnamese-born 68 per cent (Hugo, 1990:202). The difference in the labour force participation rates is particularly striking when paid women workers are compared. For example, 49–50 per cent of Australian-born women participate in the labour force compared to 35–36 per cent of Aboriginal women, while Vietnamese-born women have a rate of 57–58 per cent (Hugo, 1990:202).

On these figures, Aboriginal people (and Aboriginal women in particular) have lower rates of participation in the labour force than any other group. In some instances, for example in South Australia, Aboriginal labour force participation rates come closer to that of the total (non-Aboriginal) population among 'younger males and older females' (ABS, *Aboriginals in South Australia*, Census 86:19). But this does not necessarily translate into either full- or part-time paid employment. As Ross indicates in his study, 'the substantial majority of labour force participants were unemployed'. Only 17 per cent of all men and 12 per cent of all women were in paid employment, and 'a considerable proportion of these had only part-time employment' (23 per cent of employed men and 45 per cent of employed women) (Ross, 1989:31). This contrasts sharply with the non-Aboriginal workforce, especially among men. In August 1989, 'an estimated 86 per cent of male employees and 57 per cent of female employees were employed as permanent full-time in their main (or only) job' (ABS, *Weekly Earnings of Employees, Australia, August 1989:1*). Only 40 per cent of Aboriginal people aged 25 to 54 years were employed, compared to 72 per cent of all non-Aboriginal Australians in the same age bracket (ABS, *Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*, Census 86:22).

Historically, 'Aborigines have always been severely affected by downturns in the economy, especially during the depressions of the 1890s and 1930s' (Castle and Hagan, 1985:42) and, although precise figures are lacking, there is no reason to think the situation was any

different during the serious recession of 1991. The high rates of Aboriginal unemployment in recent times and at present, developed from the long downturn in the Australian economy which began in 1975, compounded by the decline in manufacturing and the drought of 1980–83. By contrast, in 1971 the 'official' unemployment rate for Australian Aborigines was estimated at 9.3 per cent, but by 1981 it had reached 24.7 per cent (Cousins and Nieuwenhuysen, 1983:12). Since the late 1950s and early 1960s when Aboriginal people migrated to cities from rural areas in search of work, there have been 'declining opportunities for Aborigines to obtain employment since the 1970s in urban centres, especially Adelaide' (Gale and Wundersitz, 1982: 106–107). Moreover, 'as they are largely unskilled, poorly educated and occupy a . . . lower socio-economic position than other people', Australian Aborigines are 'inevitably some of the first affected by changing economic circumstances' (Gale and Wundersitz, 1982:107).

ABORIGINAL EMPLOYMENT PATTERNS

As noted at the end of the last section, there is a correspondence between particular kinds of paid employment and high unemployment, jobs which Aboriginal people of both genders typically occupy and which are characterised by poor conditions and low pay (Ross, 1989:37–8). This section explores this in more detail.

Aboriginal people, more than any other group, work for wages or salaries. Ninety-six per cent of all Aboriginal people in paid employment receive their income from these sources, compared to 82 per cent for Australian-born non-Aboriginal males, 88 per cent for Vietnamese-born males, 82 per cent for all immigrant men and 79 per cent for all non-English speaking immigrant men. (Figures for women on this indicator are not available) (ABS, *Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*, Census 86:24; Hugo, 1990:202).

Unpublished census data shows that Aboriginal people are mainly engaged, in descending order, as cleaners, labourers of various descriptions, farm hands, truck drivers, clerks, welfare para-professionals and sales assistants. The figures are: cleaners 2074 (658 men, 1416 women), labourers 1851 (1654 men, 197 women), farm hands 1716 (1567 men, 149 women), truck drivers 1341 (1301 men, 40 women); clerks 1332 (492 men, 840 women), welfare para-professionals 1149 (no gender breakdown stated but likely to be mostly women), sales assistants 1105 (319 men, 786 women) (ABS, *Employed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Persons, occupation by sex, Abstat 13, 1986*). There is also a significant number of lower white-collar positions, such as office secretaries, stenographers, accounting clerks and

library and filing clerks (1795) of whom 1438 were women, and a proportion of factory hands (1047) comprising 792 men and 255 women. In New South Wales, as a basis for comparison, the four largest categories of paid employment for men were: 1009 'labourers', 644 'tradespersons', 551 'plant and machinery operators' and 288 'clerks' (ABS, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged 15 years and over, occupation by income, by sex, Abstat 15, 1986).

These employment patterns are confirmed in other studies. Bradley's Darwin study indicates that most Aboriginal men are unskilled or semi-skilled manual workers while Aboriginal women are most frequently found as assistants to European qualified staff, or working in routine clerical jobs (Bradley, 1987:147-8, 153). Another survey in the Northern Territory found that most Aboriginal people were in the 'lowly and often boring and unpleasant jobs', located in agriculture, pastoralism, horticulture, construction, wholesale and retail trade, government instrumentalities and Aboriginal organisations (Loveday, 1985:127, 131). At the same time, it should be pointed out that Aboriginal people choose as much as possible to work with their own people, and to some extent this explains why the public sector and Aboriginal community organisations constitute the largest employers of Aboriginal people today. Furthermore, from my own observations of, and discussions with, Aboriginal people, 'family work', that is, caring for family and relatives, largely carried out by women (and which is unpaid non-market employment) is perhaps a much stronger cultural practice among Aboriginal people than some other groups; and if so, it helps to explain the generally lower labour force participation rates among Aboriginal women described earlier. However, the relationship is by no means clear. As Ross observes, where Aboriginal men have high rates of unemployment, Aboriginal women have the 'lowest incidences' of unemployment (Ross, 1989:33).

Such evidence clearly indicates that the great majority of Aboriginal employees are located in the working class, a sociological characteristic underlined by their underrepresentation in the professions, in business, in the upper reaches of the public service, in politics, and in self-employment. Aboriginal people of both genders are almost entirely absent from those occupations which require long periods of formal education or 'scientific' expertise, for example, medicine, law, engineering, dentistry, chemistry, natural science and occupational therapy. According to unpublished census data, there were no Aboriginal judges in 1986 (ABS, Employed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons, occupation by sex, Abstat 13).

Finally, some details on paid and unpaid employment, together with other relevant material I gathered from Aboriginal people (Murriss) I met in Queensland will be presented to supplement the official and published data set out above. This provides a more qualitative and

human dimension to the figures and percentages, as well as a sociological context.

One Queensland woman is currently working for a state-funded organisation devoted to providing and maintaining housing for Aboriginal people in Ipswich. This organisation was established in the 1960s as a result of a local Aboriginal community campaign (a major driving force of which was Les Davidson who died in April, 1979). This woman is also a mother of several children and is married to an Aboriginal man who once worked at the local abattoirs, but who was forced to quit this job because of a work-related back injury. Unable to continue with this kind of work, and owing to a lack of alternative employment, he was compelled to live on social security payments. His wife's income is clearly vital.

Another woman, their friend and a daughter of Les Davidson, did not have a paid job as far as I know, but provided an essential service for young Aboriginal people in Ipswich by caring for them; organising activities for them; going to the police station to speak on their behalf when they ran foul of the law; and spending considerable time and energy maintaining an Aboriginal cemetery at Deebing Creek, a former Aboriginal mission reserve. She had also had intermittent seasonal work onion cutting. Her brother has had a varied work history. His last job was at an institution for people with mental disorders, chiefly to 'mind', control and feed the inmates. Prior to this he was unemployed for a considerable period, during which time he managed and trained a team of Aboriginal footballers. Earlier in his life, he had worked on pastoral properties in the west of the state, and had joined the Army, an experience he recalled with some satisfaction because he felt he was more of an equal with the other, non-Aboriginal servicemen, and because the Army provided regular meals, pay, and sound accommodation (personal communication with Ena Chong, Frances Wright and Bill Robertson). (This reflects the situation the Berndts describe in the Aboriginal Army camps in the Northern Territory (Berndt and Berndt, 1987).) These brief cameos thus echo what has been discussed above, namely the significance of Aboriginal community organisations and the public sector as major sources of employment; the spells of unemployment and intermittent employment; and the employment typically done by Aborigines in the non-Aboriginal economic sector, for example manual labour and farm work.

EMPLOYMENT—INCOME

As Ross points out 'employed Aborigines are predominantly in low-paid jobs' (Ross, 1989:39). This is not surprising, given that the

overwhelming majority of Aboriginal employees are working-class and at the lower paid end of it at that. All studies show that Aboriginal employees of both genders earn substantially less income than non-Aboriginal employees, especially the Australian-born. Part of the reason for this is that 78 per cent of non-Aboriginal Australian employees work on a full-time basis in their main job, accruing mean weekly earnings of \$484 (ABS, Weekly Earnings of Employees, Australia, August 1989:2) whereas only 40 per cent of Aboriginal people aged 25 to 54 years were employed in 1986 (ABS, Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Census 86:22). But actual individual income is lower as well. Ross calculated that in non-metropolitan New South Wales gross average weekly earnings for Aboriginal men and women in full-time employment in 1988 were \$235 for men and \$225 for women (Ross, 1989:39). For New South Wales as a whole, unpublished census data indicates that the average income in 1986 for Aboriginal men was \$263 per week (ABS, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged 15 years and over, occupation by income, by sex, Abstat 15). By contrast, in 1986, the mean weekly earnings of full-time male employees in New South Wales was \$420 (ABS, Weekly Earnings of Employees Australia, August 1989:3).

The gender differences are worth examining briefly. Ross' study suggests that there is no great difference in earnings between Aboriginal men and Aboriginal women for the places and people he surveyed. This indicates that 'racial' factors are more important than either gender or class factors in determining employment income. In other words, being Aboriginal is more decisive than being an Aboriginal man or a woman, or in belonging to a particular class. However, other data reveals some differences in income between Aboriginal men and women where men, at least in full-time employment, are generally more highly paid than women. For example, for Australia as a whole 'men were much more likely to be in the higher income groups', with 21 per cent of men receiving \$15 001-\$22 000 per year compared to only 9 per cent of women.

Furthermore, 74 per cent of Aboriginal women had individual annual incomes of \$9000 or less, compared to 55 per cent of Aboriginal men (ABS, Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Census 86:27). This implies that gender is an influential element determining both income and class position. Nevertheless, the discrepancy on this dimension is not nearly so great as the gender differences between non-Aboriginal men and women, at least in terms of average individual incomes. For Australia as a whole in 1989 the median weekly earnings of permanent full-time male employees was \$470, compared to \$384 for women.

CONCLUSION: A NEO-COLONIAL LABOUR FORCE?

This chapter began with an historical account of the colonisation of Aboriginal Australia, its impact on Aboriginal people, and the ways in which the latter were both excluded and included in the new social order. Without some grasp of this history of 'exclusion, exploitation and extermination' (Evans, Saunders and Cronin, 1988), the current labour market position of Aboriginal people cannot be properly understood. I then traced some of the legal and industrial issues surrounding Aboriginal workers within an historical context, particularly in the pastoral sector. These restrictive, exploitative and ambiguous practices served to marginalise rather than integrate Aboriginal employees into the dominant non-Aboriginal economy and society, irrespective of their ability. In order to explain this, I developed the concept of 'colonised labour' which is inspired in part by writers like Roberta Sykes (Sykes, 1989). While this form of labour has some affinities with slavery, I suggested that it is a distinct type, one which is subordinate to all other forms. While individual Aboriginal people were valued for their labour, and played important roles in establishing colonial society, the fact of dispossession of their country made their value as workers always precarious. 'Unemployment' therefore was as much a feature of colonised labour as 'employment'. The following sections were devoted to an analysis of the current labour market position of Aboriginal workers: unemployment and labour participation rates, employment patterns, and income. All studies, and my own observations, point to very significant inequalities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people: at least three times the rate of unemployment, much lower levels of income, and far fewer employment options. Given these realities and others canvassed earlier, it is clear that Australia's Aboriginal people in the labour market, and indeed outside it, are still struggling to emerge into a postcolonial age.

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