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TERRA AQUARIUS

A MARXIST ANALYSIS OF THE ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLE IN NIMBIN

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at the alternative lifestyle culture in Northern New South Wales, particularly those alternative lifestyle participants living around the township of Nimbin. I use a Marxist analysis, incorporating historical materialist ethnographic techniques. The primary purpose of this study was to gain insights into the class structure of modern capitalist societies.

I look at Nimbin's rural peripheral status and examine how this has impacted upon transport and work patterns, on migration, and on tourism.

I consider the role the alternative settlers play in the rural economy, the "urban" culture introduced by the new settlers, the effects of welfare subsistence on the economy, and the articulation of drug-use with the economy and with the ideology of the alternative lifestyle participants. This analysis also identifies how these processes have led to an engendering of an ethnic or class identity among the alternative lifestyle community, and of their political engagement with the national economy.

I show the extent to which the alternative lifestyle community forms a distinct micro-class, the *benefit peasantry*, and the economic, social and cultural characteristics particular to that class, and the role of migration as the primary class-forming process.

On the basis of this research I make predictions about the future development of the alternative lifestyle class, the effect of the alternative lifestyle community on Australian capitalism, and the inter-generational inheritability of the class position as the children of the original migrants reach adulthood.

IN MEMORY OF

DAWSON

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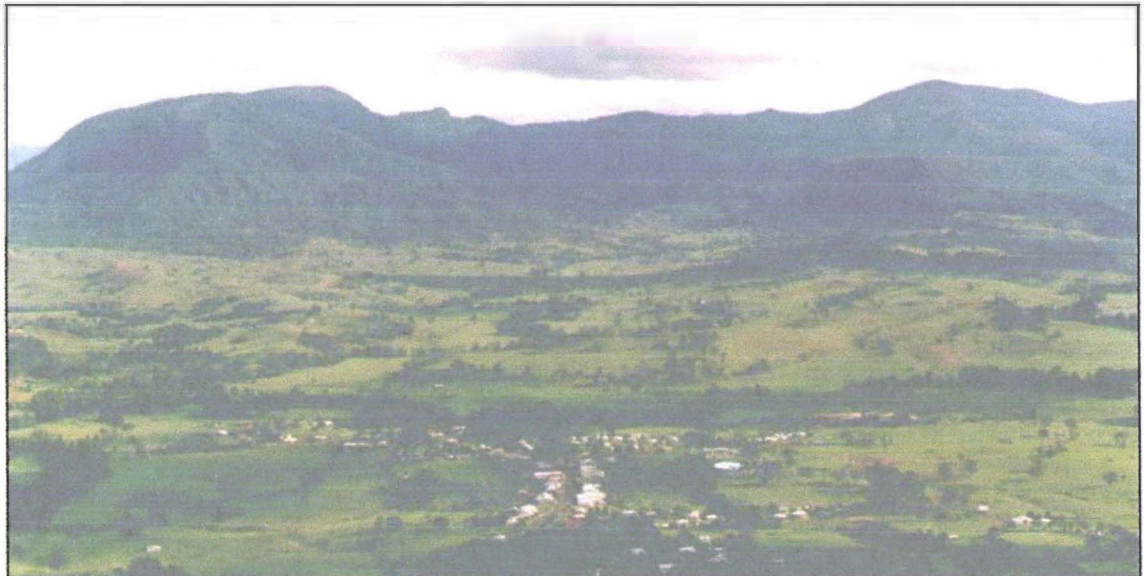
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SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

0.1 Why Nimbin?

I chose Nimbin for this research because I had lived there. I was, and remain, beguiled by the area and the people. When I was thinking about a possible thesis topic, I decided to select a subject that would keep me fascinated throughout the long process of research and writing. The alternative lifestyle in Nimbin has provided me with such a project. It has also provided me with many opportunities to return to the Northern Rivers.



Above is an aerial photo of the rural village of Nimbin taken around 1996. In the background are the Nightcap Ranges. Nimbin has a worldwide reputation as being the centre for alternative lifestyles in Australia. Photo: Inflight Photography.

Nimbin is a picturesque village in northern New South Wales. It is located close to the Border Ranges that mark the boundary with Queensland, and enjoys a beautiful sub-tropical climate and natural environment. Nimbin had a census population of 319 people in 1996. Despite its small size, Nimbin enjoys world renown in “alternative lifestyle” circles.

This fame came after the Aquarius Festival of Youth and Students was held in the village in 1973. Attracted to the great beauty of the area many alternative lifestyle

participants have settled there. It is this concentration of alternative lifestyle participants that makes Nimbin a unique rural locality, with a cultural diversity unparalleled by any other Australian village of its size.¹



I first visited Nimbin in 1984 when my partner Brendan and I went from Sydney to visit Brendan's sister and her children who lived in the area. A year later we moved to a farm-workers cottage (the little house pictured on the left) at Back Creek Road in Bentley, a location near Nimbin.

We fitted the stereotyped profile (for the time) of alternative migrants. We were from middle-class backgrounds, university educated and politically active. Suffering from the environmental stress of Sydney we were recruited by earlier migrants to the Northern Rivers in search of a better life on the dole,² and we found it. I look back on that time with great affection and have returned to visit every year since we left.

Brendan's sister was an early source of information about us to other alternative people, including the information that we were socialists. Despite the fact we were not alternative lifestyle participants, being known as a members of the Socialist Party of Australia signalled a "non-straight" orientation. It was imputed to us that, like many alternative people, we had little or no commitment to social climbing or to private

¹ I will use, for the time being, the lay definition of the word "alternative" in the context of a way of life. "Denoting lifestyle etc. regarded as preferable to that of contemporary society because it is less conventional, materialistic or institutionalized." *Collins Concise Dictionary and Thesaurus*, 1991, 23.

² The "dole" is a universally used colloquialism for the unemployment benefit in Australia and New Zealand.

property. Despite my farming background, it marked us as outsiders with regard to the straight population too.³

After news got around in the local alternative community that we were socialists, attempts were made to recruit us to one of the intentional communities. In the opinion of the person who called in to suggest this, they needed some organisation! The belief that we had something to offer *because* we were socialists was a nice contrast to the prejudice commonly experienced as a socialist in Australia. We did not accept the offer to move because we shared our life with ecologically unsound wildlife hazards (more commonly known as cats) against which there was a prohibition on this community.

I have always found it interesting that we didn't quite end up on either the straight or the alternative side of the cultural continuum: we were a bit straight as alternatives were concerned, and a bit alternative as far as the straights were concerned. This marginal boundary existence probably gave me an advantage in my research. Sometimes I was seen as one of the "us" group with a unique insight into the "other" lifestyle, and was expected to be a kind of cultural interpreter, regardless of my suitability for that task. For example, presumably on the assumption of a more flexible sexual orientation among alternatives, an elderly straight woman once asked me, "What do homosexual men do in bed?"

Sometimes, in this role as a person seen to have "inside information," I was expected to defend the "other" culture against hostile attacks. I have been challenged by straights to defend "dole-budging hippies." I have also sometimes felt it necessary to explain to alternatives that people sometimes like working in cities and can feel they are making a worthwhile contribution to the future of the planet in the way they live their lives there. Sometimes I was personally included in the statement, "You bludgers ..." or "You straights ..." and at other times it's posed in terms of being asked to explain "those other

³ I return to this in an anecdote about dairy farming. See *MIGRATORY FLOWS: Differences between rural and urban*, page 135.

people.” On occasion the questions were hostile attacks on the other culture, but more usually they represented genuine curiosity.

The experience of living on the dole near Nimbin gave me the basis for many of the issues I raise in this thesis:– what defines work, opportunities for employment, how the domestic economy and division of labour works in alternative households, the relationship between the alternative lifestyle participants and the state, and the tensions between “straight” and “alternative” members of the Nimbin community. It provided many of the insights of how an alternative lifestyle is lived out in “real life.” I could ask if other people had the same experience and viewed things in the same way, or had had similar experiences that they interpreted and explained differently. My analysis of the digging of the latrine pits was informed by my own experiences burying the toilet-can (and, despite my feminist stance, my own avoidance of it whenever possible).⁴

Despite being a non-user of cannabis, I should declare at the outset that I believe cannabis should be decriminalised. On the issue of drug use, I hope to demonstrate that although their choice of recreational drug might be different from the widespread use by the mainstream community the alternative lifestyle participants live useful, productive lives, and make a significant (and measurable) contribution to mainstream Australia.

What makes my thesis different from other work is that it is a Marxist analysis of the alternative lifestyle in Nimbin. Using an orthodox historical materialist model this thesis aims to find and to explain the economics that underpin the alternative culture, and to locate the class position of the alternative lifestyle participants in Nimbin.

0.2 Main ethical concerns

I am concerned not to promulgate the notion of Nimbin as a place to acquire drugs (score) in this thesis, yet to not talk about drugs is untruthful and not particularly helpful. Nimbin is a place to score, there is no doubting that, but there is so much more

⁴ See HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTION: Gendered division of labour – Case study, page 172.

to the town. Partly what decided me not to agonise too long over this issue is the public and joyous celebration of cannabis use by the community itself. Every year there is a “Hemp Festival” in Nimbin, which is widely publicised, filmed, and photographed. The parade features a huge joint, showing that it is not only the usefulness of industrial (non-drug bearing) hemp that is being celebrated. I will not be “disclosing any secrets” by discussing the widespread use of cannabis by this group.

Despite my abhorrence of anti-drug hysteria, it was usually drug-related events that challenged my tolerance the most. One of my most difficult days was on a weekday morning in Nimbin in May 1998. I noticed a teenager “nodding” after having taken a little too much heroin and helped stretch her to the Nimbin hospital for emergency resuscitation. I was pretty keyed up by this, and afterwards stopped at a café to have breakfast and a coffee. A young man who I hadn’t met before joined me at the table and we got to talking about what had happened. He suggested to me that the young woman was better off dead if she was a user [actually she was a high school student who had decided to “piss her boyfriend off” and had made a dosing mistake]. He said that I should have let the junkies look after their own and imputed to me base reasons for helping her – “getting off on it” – was how he expressed it. I thought that this was an interesting way of viewing things, particularly coming from a person living on an alternative community, and decided it was likely a test of my attitudes as much as a real expression of his own thinking. It was still hard to take. I wrote in my field notes that day that,

Nimbin has to be the only place I was ever likely to have to restart someone who’d od’ed , before I’d had breakfast, and then have someone suggest I’d been wasting my time!” I feel tired and unusually pessimistic. I want to sit quietly in the sunshine and recover from the low level contamination from the bad feel in the village. The backpackers are driving me nuts too. I came home and washed my clothing and my hair, and refocused on what I was doing.

Fieldnotes, May 1998.

This was a low point. Generally speaking, though, by the time I was researching this thesis I was pretty resilient to the drug scene, the hard-earned result of my long exposure to Nimbin. Once, when I failed to be shocked at the disclosure that “some women in the

city sell themselves for drugs you know,” I was asked if I was a sex worker from Sydney. This person then rolled up his trouser leg with great ceremony and showed me his suppurating tropical ulcer, explaining he was on his way to the hospital to have it treated. None of the local people (who had greeted him by name when he arrived) reacted to any of this beyond being mildly amused at his behaviour. I can’t say I was particularly bothered by it myself (being fairly shock-proof and having a strong stomach for other people’s welts and wounds) but I don’t imagine it would have been every tourist’s “dream interaction” with one of the locals and even I wasn’t particularly keen to prolong it.

My rule-of-thumb was “is this fair?” Sometimes something might be true but not fair, because things happen that might normally not occur, or the stories or statements are taken out of context. I asked myself how I’d feel if I were with the person when they read what I’d written. If I thought I’d feel uncomfortable, I left it out.

I suppressed many stories and statements because I did not want to hurt feelings, or because use in a context other than that for which it was gathered was inappropriate. Sometimes I’d been granted privileged access as a *friend* and to use the information acquired by my involvement in that activity or crisis would be a breach of trust, no matter how true it might be or how sympathetically used. However, all these experiences became part of my general orientation and understanding of the alternative community in Nimbin.

On one occasion a person agreed to me taping their life history, and then when I went back with my tape recorder as arranged, I was asked to explain what my attitudes were and why I was doing the research. This person was having a difficult time and the environment in Nimbin was a little tense with both police actions and hostile media campaign in full swing (both sometimes undercover). I abandoned plans for a taped interview, and instead we just talked.

Interestingly, it was straight people who were most shy about being recorded, although they were happy to talk. I was once asked, “You’re not taping me are you, no secret

recorders?” I always assured the person that I was under a strict code of ethics and I would never record anyone without their consent.

I also wanted to make sure I got things right. I did a lot of checking that I was on the right track, writing up parts of my thesis and getting it “reality proofed” by someone who was likely to know if I had understood the situation properly. I sent transcripts of life history recordings to the person I interviewed for them to check, and a corrected copy for them to keep. I also sent to people the part of the document they appeared in – so they knew the context in which I had used the information they had given me, and could check the conclusions that I had drawn from their interview were correct. These interactions often led to further observations and discussions.

This feedback was done by correspondence, by taking paper copies back with me on a subsequent visit, and with phone conversations and email exchanges. Several people who helped on this thesis would phone me from Australia when they were ready to discuss a portion of the draft (or just fancied a chat) and they would give me the number they were calling from so I could call them back on my phone account.

I feel a responsibility to get information back to Nimbin people in a free and accessible way. After all, it is their story, their lives, and their town, and I owe the Nimbin community something in return. I plan to achieve this by posting this thesis on a website, providing copies on CD, printing hard copies for computerless places and people, and writing articles for the Nimbin News. It will also give Nimbin people and their friends the opportunity to correct my mistakes and challenge my views if they feel so inclined.

Some of the safeguards that govern interactions between “researcher” and “subject” are inappropriate in the Nimbin context. The alternative lifestylers are highly literate and self aware. The alternative lifestyle participants consciously consider and debate their place as a group existing within a mainstream culture. They won’t agree just to be neighbourly, although they might disengage from the conversation with acknowledgement of people’s right to hold different views. They are fully members of the same society as myself (despite the fact their lifestyle is an engagement with and a

challenge to, many aspects of the Australian mainstream.) Generally speaking alternatives have no problem dealing with researchers.

Data collection by official bodies

There has been a persistently inconsistent picture of Nimbin in official figures. Non-participation in bureaucratic processes (for example the tradition of not voting) has been endemic for a long time. While this thesis does not attempt to discover and correct the problems that data-collectors have in Nimbin, it can provide clues as to why such anomalies exist. Combined with ethnographic technique the materialist approach of this study allows us a depth of comprehension and explanation unavailable from social statistics or liberal explanations of the alternative movement.

A large number of persons in the area only “report” their presence when there is a material reason to do so. For the alternative lifestyle participants there may be factors that require them not to tell the truth, because telling the truth may incur economic consequences, for example it might result in the loss of a benefit or being arrested. This cagey attitude to authorities is the result of being relatively dependent upon outside bodies for their income, and vulnerable to rule-governed bureaucracies and political pressure.

Metcalf makes the point that survey and Census data is based on the assumption of people reporting accurately and truthfully on their lives.

It is frequently forgotten that even social science data which is seen as being “hard,” such as census data, is in fact, based on the assumption that respondents are able to self-define their reality and that they will honestly report such phenomenological realities.

Metcalf, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986, 1.4, 12.

Where Metcalf says, “self-define their reality,” I see many of these “self-defined realities” as conscious political redefinitions of mainstream “realities.” I think the alternative lifestyle participants strategise to protect their way of life when they complete official forms and that this behaviour is at the same time an economic and political activity.

The usefulness of Census data also depends upon how meaningful the questions were. Even “empirical” and supposedly complete data such as the Census cannot be entirely relied upon because the categories into which such an answer must be forced are often too narrow.

Before looking at the empirical evidence on means of earning a living, several problems must be raised. First, many participants are living in ways which are difficult to classify. For example, one participant I know works two to three months of the year as a consulting engineer, a month or so picking fruit, occasional days as a labourer for local farmers and collects unemployment benefits for at least some of the rest of the time. Clearly he cannot be easily classified as unemployed or working in a professional capacity, although he is, at various times during the year, in each category.

Metcalf, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986, 5.5.2, 90.

Older surveys of alternative lifestyle participants have concentrated on intentional communities to the exclusion of the majority of alternative participants who live in what are called “sole households,” and they have tended to have a low response rate.⁵ One of the reasons that people living on communities are often targeted for research into alternative lifestyles: because they can be found in the official data more easily than non-community dwellers (sole householders) who are less easy to strictly define as alternative. The Census covers all persons regardless of their position on the straight-alternative continuum because “alternative” is not a recognised “ethnicity” in the bureaucratic sense.

As Carol de Launey commented about the alternative zone around Nimbin, “the area has no specific demographic [Census] data available as it is considered part of [the wider] Lismore Local Government area,” and comments that depending on how you define “the

⁵ See Metcalf and Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, (1987) for a thorough discussion of the research into the social and demographic characteristics of alternative lifestyle participants in Australia in the 1980's, and an overview of the research methods used by the researchers.

Nimbin area” the surrounding region has between 2,000 and 10,000 people.⁶ The demographic information on Nimbin gathered by different government organisations and service agencies differs hugely. The 1996 Census showed that the village had a population of 319 people, and supports a population in the surrounding area of another 1766 persons. The Nimbin Skills Survey identified the skills base of 3,000 people in Nimbin and the surrounding district,⁷ and the doctor’s surgery had 3,000 people on its books – many more than the Census population in the catchment area would suggest as likely. Health planning information reported that there were 100 indigenous people living in Nimbin, but the 1996 Census reported only three Torres Strait Islanders or Aborigines. The difference of 97% is unexplained.⁸

The Nimbin Neighbourhood Centre said that between January and March 1998, 141 people presented themselves to the centre as homeless, which suggests that 44% of the total population of Nimbin village (or 15% of the wider catchment population reported by Census data) was homeless in a three month period.⁹ Despite the likely reporting errors, this still points to a massive housing crisis and to a highly mobile population.

0.3 Methodology

Thanks to Dr Bill Metcalf (and an introduction from Alan Hill, who was then working at the Lismore City Council) I discovered what had been a huge (but until then invisible)

⁶ Carol de Launey, *Use of Cannabis and Other Drugs in Nimbin*, Draft Paper, 1997, 2.

⁷ “Self Sufficient Local Economy,” *Nimbin News*, April–May 1999, 24.

⁸ 1996 Census information from Lismore City Council, extract from Draft Social Atlas. Tricia Shantz, Lismore City Council. [Personal communication.]

⁹ 1996 Census information from Lismore City Council, extract from Draft Social Atlas. Tricia Shantz, Lismore City Council. [Personal communication.]

body of information on Nimbin.¹⁰ In addition to participant observation and interviews, therefore, I was able to use a range of secondary sources.

I had hoped to use Census information for updates on demographics, sources of income, education and mobility. I intended to obtain disaggregated data to pinpoint alternative households for mapping. However, the Census turned out to be less useful than I had hoped because the mesh-block was too big. CentreLink was also unable to provide data because Nimbin shares the Lismore postcode.¹¹

I had also hoped to utilise Lismore City and Shire councils records for land ownership information, to discuss the challenges to the regulations governing multiple ownership of land, building codes, demands on the council to provide services to the alternative community and so on. These all have effects on the ability of the new settlers to borrow money to purchase and improve land. Some of these issues were covered in Lismore City Council plans and their social atlas of their surrounding districts.

I learned a great deal more when I was trying to buy land myself. People at the shire council and real estate offices were very forthcoming on the advantages and disadvantages of multiple ownership and other forms of land ownership. They discussed the land, land value, the past, present and potential uses of those blocks, who had lived there before and why they had left, what money was owed to the council and what the access was like.

¹⁰ One of Australia's foremost experts on the alternative lifestyle, Dr Bill Metcalf, kindly provided me with an annotated bibliography that ran to 60 pages, yet library searches (done for me by professional librarians at both Massey University and Victoria University of Wellington Libraries) seeking information on the alternative lifestyle had yielded only around ten references.

¹¹ CentreLink is the government organisation that co-ordinates the formerly separate community and welfare organisations such as Youth and Community Services, the Department of Labour, and the Department of Social Security.

Over the years I kept track of the number of enterprises that cater to the alternative lifestyle such as retail outlets for clothing, second-hand stores and stalls, bulk whole-food stores, vegetarian restaurants, health services; alternative political representation in local body and state politics, on school boards and so on; services for the alternative community in the form of the community centre, alternative schools, media (radio and newspapers) directed at an alternative audience, cultural activities; the growth of alternative energy technologies and the likelihood they will lead to increased employment opportunities in the area; and the establishment of tourism in Nimbin. This gave me information about the changing infrastructure in the village, the growth industries, changing employment opportunities, and important social issues. I also noted the increase in these facilities in neighbouring Lismore, Casino and Kyogle. This background allowed me to chart the changing economic interests and social needs of the alternative lifestyle participants.

I wanted to be able to show changing land-use patterns using Department of Agriculture information and also aerial maps of the area. However, like the Census, the Department of Agriculture's sample threshold was too high to include many of the alternative blocks.¹² I acquired aerial photos of Nimbin from the Surveyor General's Department for the years 1958, 1971 and 1997, hoping that they would show changing patterns in land-use and changing vegetation. Perhaps I looked in the wrong place but the photos I ordered did not show what I was hoping. Black and white aerial photographs of scrub don't look significantly different from regenerating bush.

The initial research proposal had included a plan to get informants to keep time and household finance budgets, but I was also forced to abandon this part of my plan. I kept time budgets and cost/expenditure records on myself to gauge how much time it took, what level of organisation was required, and the pitfalls involved. I was surprised at the effort required. Despite an offer to pay people who did this work for me I was unable to obtain this information. What I was able to do was record what happened in households

¹² The income threshold of \$20,000 excluded many of the small holdings in the Nimbin area.

where I was staying during fieldwork visits.¹³ In addition I had pre-printed check-lists for a domestic technology audit. I looked around people's homes and ticked off the household machinery they had, for example, mains power, fridge, stove, a microwave. I also gathered quite a lot of background data by simple observation and recording, as well as cooking with friends.

I also hoped to do a content analysis of *Nimbin News*, and planned to analyse two issues for every year since 1973. I purchased some backdated issues from *Nimbin News*, and obtained photocopies of others from the Rainbow Archives at the Mitchell Library (part of the NSW State Library in Sydney.) I completed coding and analysis of 34 out of a possible 50 editions before I abandoned the content analysis because I was unable to get an acceptable spread of issues. The earliest issue I was able to obtain was 1980, and I had no issues at all for 1981, 1983 and 1986, and only one edition for several other years (1984, 1985, 1986 and 1990).

I analysed and coded 34 editions dating between 1980 and 2000, and I annotated all issues since the June-July issue of 1996 (another 29 editions). Data was entered into a database, which meant that I had a way of doing a free text search and finding all the related articles on the same subjects. This greatly improved my reliability and effectiveness for finding material, so despite not completing the content analysis, the work I did still proved invaluable.¹⁴

Sixteen years is a long time, and over that time I talked with anyone who would have a conversation with me about Nimbin – farmers, shop keepers, newspaper employees, unemployed people in Sydney wanting to move to Nimbin, visitors in Nimbin who expressed aspirations to migrate, people who were disillusioned with the Nimbin scene,

¹³ For example, look at the rich detail available in Oscar Lewis's works, for example, *La Vida*, 1965, New York, Random House.

¹⁴ I transferred most of my information to computer: fieldnotes, interviews, life history transcripts and "raves." I also transferred my reading notes, so that I could text-search for things I was interested in.

people who had left, people in council offices, private sellers of land, health professionals, straight and alternative school kids and their teachers, artists, musicians and actors, real estate agents, drug users and sellers, and some of the more peripheral Nimbin people (sometimes known as droogs and ferals), beneficiaries resident in and around Nimbin, people who lived on communities and sole householders, people who host visitors, backpackers and other tourists, workers in Nimbin workplaces, bus drivers, taxi drivers, and other researchers.

I taped or noted the life history of all my main contacts, many of whom are listed in the acknowledgements. I also talked to participants in socially contested events and interactions to get a multi-faceted view of a particular interaction or conflict, seeking an explanation from the people involved of what they understood was going on. I took notes of many of the conversations I had.

I have an abiding curiosity about other people's lives, what they do and how they think about things. The materialist focus of my study requires me to evaluate people and their interactions, tearing their lives down to economic forces and denying their ideology of self-determination. For all that, most people responded positively to a genuinely-felt interest in their lives and seemed to appreciate the opportunity to discuss another perspective on their lives. Generally people like to talk (to be listened to) and the alternative lifestyle is one that people feel they are qualified to discuss. My enjoyment of, and interest in, these stories and conversations is undisguised.

Alternatives talk a lot about their own lives (reflexiveness is a feature of their culture) and life histories and migration stories are traded among people – when did you come, what did you do before, who do you know, when did you first visit Nimbin? With the high levels of migration it was sometimes hard to get continuity. Sometimes I would return to Nimbin to find virtually no-one I knew well still in the village, but I always managed to track them down eventually, often finding them in the wider alternative zone around Nimbin, or back in Brisbane or Sydney.

0.4 Organisation of the thesis

This thesis is in seven sections: Introduction, Migration, Production Relations, Value-Added Work, Cultural Infrastructure, Class Position and Summary.

The INTRODUCTION is in three parts. First I provide a brief overview of the research project, and why I chose Nimbin. I examined the problems in the official data held by various agencies about Nimbin, and explained how I went about doing my research.

Chapter 1, **Modelling the Alternative Lifestyle**, offered a brief overview of the literature on Nimbin. I drew a distinction between my research (its Marxist approach) and the way other researchers have dealt with Nimbin, and how their approach has created difficulties for them, for example in “defining” the alternative group.

Chapter 2, **Situating Nimbin**, looks at settlement patterns prior to the migration of the alternative lifestyle participants to the area. I review the history of land-use, the geology of Nimbin and the significance of the area to the local Aboriginal people, and the original settlement of the area by white farmers and croppers, and the influence of core-periphery on subsequent development patterns. These are all important factors that impacted upon the later settlement and land-use patterns for the Nimbin area.

The issue of finding the alternative lifestyle groups as a class was revisited in greater depth in Chapter 3, **Class Forming Processes**. In this chapter I propose a ten-point matrix of characteristics that form the alternative group into a class, of which migration is the primary process.

The MIGRATION section is in two parts. Chapter 4, **Migration to Nimbin**, deals with the question, “why Nimbin” of all the places alternatives could have migrated to. It attempts to locate the economic basis of the alternative migration to Nimbin, and examines how a critical mass was reached and recruitment occurred making Nimbin into the centre for alternatives that it is today.

Chapter 5, **Migratory Flows**, looks at the various waves of alternative migration that have populated Nimbin. It looks at the social effects of these “invasions” from the point

of view of acceptance and resistance, from the point of view of the straight population and between groups of alternative migrants. I argue that migration is the primary class-forming process for this group of alternatives.

The section PRODUCTION RELATIONS looks at what alternative people do for a living after they have migrated – in what ways their lifestyle is itself a form of productive work.

In Chapter 6, **Household Production**, I look at the alternative mode of production as being household focussed, and that the alternative mode of production imposes certain restrictions on how domestic life is lived. In it I argue that alternative households tend to be under-capitalised, prolonging the amount of domestic labour undertaken because of a lack of labour-saving machinery and services. I also argue that one of the most valuable “primary products” made by the alternative lifestyle is workers (children.)

Chapter 7, **Land-use Patterns**, examines the way in which alternatives use their land. In this context I use the theory of ground rent to explain the success and failure of land-based production in the area. I also argue that there is an economic value in “inhabitation” without exploitation, and that the relatively passive land use favoured by many alternatives has rehabilitated the land. The fact of their inhabitation in a low-employment rural area also confers upon many alternatives the right to benefits.

Chapter 8, **Cannabis Cropping**, looks at the importance of the cannabis crop to the Nimbin economy. I offer an analysis of cannabis growing and selling in Nimbin, and suggest a likely trajectory for this primary product if it were to be legalised.

The section on VALUE-ADDED WORK looks at tourism and at research and development work. Chapter 9, **Tourism**, begins by looking at proximity (as with ground rent) as one of the most significant influences on the development of this industry in Nimbin. I go on to look at the effects of a tourism industry on a small village, and how the Nimbin community are dealing with these issues.

Chapter 10, **Research and Development Work**, looks at how environmentally aware Nimbin people have invented alternative energy technologies and the growth of computer-based work in the area.

CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE; is a section that deals with ideological issues. Chapter 11, **Core Issues in Alternative Ideology**, examines the differences between what alternatives say they believe and what they do. It looks at how the alternative ideology unites the alternatives into a group, despite the different interpretations they bring to their understanding of that ideology.

Chapter 12, **Productive Core of the Hippie Nation**, looks at Nimbin as the centre of alternative ideological production. It examines the alternative relationship with the mainstream media, and examines alternative practices as both cultural expressions and as political statements.

The final section, CLASS POSITION, looks the class location of the alternative lifestyle participants in Nimbin and other areas like it. In Chapter 13, **Class In Itself**, I argue that the alternative lifestyle participants in Nimbin (and places like it) form a micro-class, the benefit peasantry, characterised by a particular rural lifestyle and benefit dependence.

In Chapter 14, **Class For Itself**, I argue that their common class position, determined by their shared relationship to the means of production, informs the activity of the alternative lifestyle population and compels them to some actions and not others. The specific activities engendered by their class position – independent, small scale and local class actions – are evidence of their acting as a class *for itself*. In Chapter 15, **Likely Class Trajectory**, I suggest what political activity and alliances the benefit peasantry might achieve.

Notes on referencing and spelling

Internet resources are fully referenced with their URL but not with the date that I accessed them. Internet sites are ephemeral, and later readers might go to that site reference and find the page to no longer exist. This cannot be helped, and it is the cost of the good things that the internet provides, for example, inexpensive, flexible, and

interactive information. All the internet resources cited were accessed during the course of writing this thesis: none before August 1997 and none after September 2001. The vast majority were accessed in October 1997, January, March and November of 1999 and September 2000.

With regard to referencing, I have put as much detail as possible on the page that the quote appears on. I did this because I have always hated flicking between the main text of a document to notes and bibliographies in a different place. Minor references are fully cited on the page they appear on. This is because it seems inappropriate to me to include in the bibliography references that I have given only sketchy attention to, or that are only peripherally relevant to this topic.

References from the archives of the mainstream Lismore newspaper the *Northern Star* were stamped by their records person only with the date of publication, not with the page number the article appeared on.

Gaia Films (Gaia Films produced a marvellous *Nearly Normal Nimbin* television documentary series covering 20 years of Nimbin alternative history) and the *Nimbin News* magazine both represent a longitudinal coverage of the village, which explains my heavy use of their material. In addition, both of these organisations depend upon good will, co-operation, and collaboration of a great many local people, and are therefore strongly representative of the wide range of views and concerns of people in Nimbin.

Most of the illustrations that I have used are from the public domain. They are scanned from postcards or have been published on the web or printed in the newspaper. In the tradition of things published on the web they are assumed to be publicly available with appropriate credits.

I have not capitalised the words straight and alternative, even when I have used them as a quasi-ethnic descriptors. This is because there is no precedent from the alternative community for this. I have tended to use “hippies” rather than “hippys” although both are in common use. Similarly, I have not corrected the spelling or grammar when citing alternative sources, nor have I marked it with “sic.” It seems to me that in the Nimbin

context that would be presumptuous. This is because that usage may be deliberate, but in any case for them the message is more important than the spelling. I have used expressions like “alternatives,” “alternative lifestylers,” and “alternative lifestyle participants” interchangeably. I also use “Aboriginal” interchangeably with the politicised “Koori.”

Chapter 1. Modelling the alternative lifestyle

1.2 Theoretical Introduction

Main contributions of this study

I have argued that a Marxist approach can simplify the analysis of the alternative lifestyle. In this thesis I have used a toolbox of orthodox Marxist concepts in order to concretely theorise the relationship of the material basis of the alternative lifestyle to its ideological superstructure. These concepts include ground rent, colonialisation, dominant and subordinate modes of production, the reserve army of labour, the production of labour power, the means of production, ideological and political hegemony, class in itself and class for itself.

The strength of my analysis is that it is focused on the creation of a local class – which I call the benefit peasantry – by the class-forming process of migration. This migration is historically situated within the Australian economy by an examination of the core-periphery differences between Sydney and Nimbin. Following from this, the existence of a migration of particular persons – who have moved from one class position to another, to a small set of class positions in the target area – is quite straightforward because they have a great deal in common in a materialist sense. Using the degree of inclusion and exclusion based on a set of material features of the rural alternative lifestyle movement we are in a position to provide a materialist definition of the alternative lifestyle participants.

The alternative migrants people have a distinct class position. They are not engaged in farming or in support industries for farming so they're not in traditional rural occupations. Instead they largely derive their income from non-traditional land-use, eco-tourism, rusticated technology industries, or from benefits. So, while you might expect their interests to approximate those of other rural workers, their specific class position and culture leads to different outcomes and priorities. Neither do their economic

interests parallel those of city workers. The wages struggle, for example, is irrelevant for most alternative lifestyle participants.

I see the alternative lifestyle participants as a class group acting in its own *material* interests and directed by a sustaining ideology. There are several interdependent contributions that this study makes to the body of knowledge about alternative lifestyles and modern class structure. They are: —

- The identification of urban-to-rural migration as the key to the class-forming process for the alternative lifestyle participants in Nimbin.
- The ethnic boundaries of the alternative lifestyle participants can be determined by a matrix of interacting characteristics, not all of which need apply to a given individual but are typical of the group taken as a whole.
- The determination of the class position of the alternative lifestyle participants as benefit peasants, that this is a micro-class, and a class position that they retain only so long as they remain in the countryside.
- Identifying the economic contribution made by the benefit peasants in exchange for the subsidy paid to them as a class by the state: this contribution locates an economic value in habitat preservation through passive and non-exploitative types of land use and in their work as inventors and in child-raising. Their habitation and protection of the environment also contributes to tourism income for the area.
- A re-evaluation of the material basis of the gendered division of labour within the household in terms of the means of production (domestic technology).

The alternative lifestyle community in Nimbin is dynamic and diverse and this complexity makes it difficult to make quantifiable generalisations about them. A model of society that takes into account the dialectical struggle of the material and ideological forces at work is a more powerful tool for understanding and improving it. I look to the material and ideological history of the alternative lifestyle in order to better explain and to predict the future of the alternative way of life. While I think their *explanation* of what

they do is flawed, this doesn't mean that I think the alternative culture is itself fundamentally flawed.¹⁵ A better model of their economic arena, the environment in which they operate, is always an advantage, and makes their survival as a culture (and as a class) more likely. I want to cut away the ideological elements by which the participants legitimate the culture and look instead for its economic pre-determinants.

Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., and precisely men conditioned by the mode of production of their material life, their material intercourse and its further development in the social and political structure.¹⁶

Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology*, 1977, Marx & Engels Selected Works Volume 1, 25.

A theoretical structure illuminates the primary links, and gives analytical clarity and consistency to research. Without such a theoretical framework, we are stuck with what Aristotle described as “proximate causes” (nearby causes) because the “effective causes” haven't been attended to. By providing a better model, ethnographic work can be seen as form of empowerment, because the more thoroughly people understand the causes of their circumstances the more equipped they are to act on them.

Questions that presented themselves included: – How do you identify the alternative lifestyle participants? Why was there a reversion to a strongly gendered division of labour? How would I go about explaining (within an orthodox Marxist framework) the

¹⁵ As I use the word culture, it includes the notion of the economic and technological basis to a society – the sum of the information that allows people to live. In other words, the “model” they have in their heads of the world and the artifacts they have created are what enables them to act within it. Culture in this sense also includes a notion of ideology being an aspect of the material objects people produce and practices that they undertake.

¹⁶ This phrase was in the original version, but deleted from later editions of *The German Ideology*. There is a nice irony in this quote whose brilliant dialectical idea is linguistically marked by “men ... and precisely men,” as having been produced at a time when “intellectual” production was monopolised by men. Through self-reference, it has demonstrated its truth as well as expounding it.

alternative migration away from work? What class do they belong to? Is what they do *class* politics or (moral) eco-activism? How could I locate and explain the basis of the strongly held notion that people's ideas direct their activity? What political relevance (revolutionary potential) does the alternative lifestyle movement have?

Other trends and questions only became apparent later – for example, the movement to legalise cannabis, the debates over rural sub-divisions and multiple occupancy communities, the effect of tourism, and the development of the alternative lifestyle participants around Nimbin into a self-conscious *class for itself*.

“Reading for silence,” was an idea brought to life by Louis Althusser in *Reading Capital*. Reading for silence, for absence, can provide valuable insights into any cultural product. However you have to have some idea of what exists in order to know what is not there. As a Marxist I was struck by the lack of a comprehensive materialist analysis of the “Nimbin phenomenon,” and the potential of orthodox Marxist theory to explain mass social movements became apparent.

[The purpose of social science should be] to make the broad masses understand full well the society they live in, to organise their collective life in accordance with existing social laws and to help satisfy their ever-growing needs.

Professor Fei Hsiao Tung, 1981 Malinowski Memorial Lecture.¹⁷

It is through ethnographic studies that we can gain an insight into how people actually live within their culture, the resources that their culture gives them to act within the wider society, and how global processes intersect with how they live their lives. Ethnography allows us to see how people embody their ideologies, and how their cultural practices refract their material circumstances.

One of the big challenges of this project is to strongly relate a materialist analysis to the ideological and the personal. It can be difficult to establish strong causal links between

¹⁷ Quoted in Loomis, *Pacific Migrant Labour, Class & Racism in New Zealand*, 1990, xv. In some translations, Fei Hsiao Tung is spelled Fei Xiaotong.

an economic base and the alternative ideology. That is, to explain how the economic situation at the time gave rise to such ideas, and why these ideas and not others. This is the domain of the Marxist theory of the dialectical relationship between the economic and ideological.

It is a focus on the economic rather than the ideological that distinguishes my work from that of other researchers in this area. I look beyond the legitimations for more central causal processes for the alternative movement and its culture.

As a Marxist, I define the boundaries of the alternative lifestyle community by *material* factors that are common to the alternative lifestyle group, rather than *ideological* similarities between them, and by group processes rather than individual attributes. My goal is to lay down the groundwork to a materialist understanding of the trajectory of the alternative lifestyle and to point towards a scientific definition of “alternative.”

A materialist anthropology will provide a context within which questions can be discussed on a materialist rather than idealist basis. This is a challenge to the anti-materialist trend in the anthropology of alternative lifestyles, and to modern class theory.

The ideas which [...] individuals form are ideas either about their relations to nature or about their mutual relations or about their own nature. It is evident that in all these cases their ideas are the conscious expression—real or illusory—of their real relationship and activities, of their production and intercourse and of their social and political organisation. The opposite assumption is only possible if in addition to the spirit of the real, materially evolved individuals a separate spirit is presupposed. If the conscious expression of the real relations of these individuals is illusory, if in their imagination they turn reality upside-down, then this in its turn is the result of their limited material mode of activity and their limited social relations arising from it.¹⁸

Marx, *Feuerbach. Opposition of Materialist and Idealistic Outlook*, 1977, Marx & Engels Selected Works Volume 1, 24.

¹⁸ This passage was crossed out in the original manuscript.

Using what is essentially a conflict model to understand the alternative lifestyle is almost an anathema to the alternative lifestyle participants themselves because of the enormous cultural emphasis they put on tolerance and harmony. An even bigger factor is the cult of personal choice and autonomy, which militates against locating the general material circumstances (in which these “free” decisions are taken) that allow or constrain choices. Moreover, trying to find the materialist factors that have influenced the direction and outcomes of the alternative lifestyle movement, in a culture that is seen as being primarily ideological (counter-cultural, rather than counter-economic) is unfashionable.

My challenge was to use Marxist concepts to examine the “Nimbin phenomena,” to determine if it were possible to fit the Nimbin alternatives into a class framework, selecting the best concept for the job, rather than checking the usefulness of every Marxist concept. If I were accepting the received wisdom of class structure, without including aspects of ethnology, then the alternative lifestyle participants would be (by and large) seen as part of the middle class.

1.2 How others have dealt with the alternative movement

Marxism, Neo-Marxism and Mass Social Movements

A lot of criticism has been levelled at orthodox Marxist scholarship on the issue of mass social movements (sometimes also called new social movements) like the peace movement and the green movement. Its critics believe that Marxist theory is not sensitive enough to deal with these social movements without major reinterpretation. Some theorists have “reformulated” Marxism to cope with social movements that don’t appear to be driven by class (economic) issues. Many modern class theorists have failed to use the two great strengths of Marxist theory – dialectics and historical materialism – and this has meant that they have been blinded to the impact of ideological and moral pressure on the political and economic forces.

Despite the apparently contradictory class position of this group, despite the fact they appear to confound Marxist class theory, I still think the alternative social movement can be best explained by historical materialism.

For example, while the alternative lifestyle culture is not particularly well developed for the accumulation of wealth, some people are acquiring “capital” in the form of land. Owning their own land is an ideal shared by many alternative lifestyle participants. It is one major material purchase (investment) that is culturally approved. Land is one of the traditional “means of production,” and it might be thought that the ownership of land would make them a part of the petit-bourgeoisie. Yet other aspects of their lifestyle negate this categorisation, the most important of which is the fact that this land was not “productive” in the capitalist sense at the time of purchase. Land ownership also represents a contradiction between a generalised anti-private property stance and real life that had to be explained.

“False consciousness” might describe their failure to correctly identify with their original class group, however I think it is a helpful concept only in so far as it points to something that needs to be explained. I am concerned to explain (using a materialist understanding of the lifestyle) why anomalies and unprogressive elements appear in the alternative lifestyle (the apparent reversion to more traditional roles of women, and the number of children that alternative families have despite their concerns of over-population, for example.) The discrepancy between an ideology and reality needs to be theorised concretely in each case, and the term false consciousness seems to me to be merely a way of generalising the question rather than dealing with it.

The following much cited passage from Marx’s *Critique of Political Economy* rewards re-reading. It shows that you do not have to “invert” Marx, or “reconstruct” Marxist theory to make sense of the alternative lifestyle participants in Nimbin.¹⁹ You do not need to

¹⁹ Many of the arguments that have been put forward to support the idea of mass (or new) social movements share similarities with the original Frankfurt School theorists. See CLASS FOR ITSELF: Political History: Moral Critique, page 419.

explain their culture and politics in the terms of the so-called “new social movements,” but can rely on an intelligent use of orthodox Marxism. This thesis will consistently argue for an approach that delves deeply enough to locate a materialist explanation for social phenomena such as the alternative lifestyle movement, rather than relying on what participants say about themselves.

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of man that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or—what is but a legal expression of the same thing—with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution. With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production. No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.

Marx, *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1977, Marx & Engels Selected Works Volume I, 303-4.

I purposefully limited my engagement with other theories. It seemed to me that many neo-Marxists and mass social movement theorists were concerned to portray their political actions as non-class, and had little or no relevance to what my theoretical objectives were (which was to locate class in the alternative way of life). I thought it significant although they “challenged” the Marxist theoretical framework, very few actually cited Marx or Lenin in their work. It also seemed to me that the mass social movement theory largely was a sophisticated reworking of the Frankfurt School theories, which I had dealt with in my MA monograph.²⁰ It’s not that these theories have nothing at all to offer, but they are simply not my field of interest.²¹

I argue that this analysis of a micro-class is within the orthodox Marxist tradition, and by doing so I provide a case study for other Marxists who are floundering with their analysis of mass social movements. I have reverted to a simpler Marxist analysis to the one devised by Erik Olin Wright and others. Theorists like Jan Pakulski (1991), Erik Olin Wright et al (1992) and David Pepper (1991, 1993) insist that ideology and moral politics can drive the economic, but they do not point to any examples that are not, in the last instance, economically-based.

Those persons who look primarily at the ideological forces have failed to grasp the materialist supports that make moral protest possible. This is because they have not located the economic sub-structure onto which the alternative lifestyle movement has been built. Instead, they have been diverted by what those protest groups report about themselves, and have developed complicated theories of new (or mass) social movements.

Murray, Sam & Brendan Tuohy, *The Theory and Application of Marxism*, Unpublished MA Monograph, 1984, Sydney University.

²¹ With just as much justice (or even more) other critics might complain that I have not dealt with in even the most cursory fashion the enormous anthropological literature available in English written by researchers in China and the former Soviet Union. Our Western prejudice

This thesis has several fully-explored examples, looking at the relationship of the base and superstructure, and how cultural preferences are made from within a set of economic choices. One of these examples was traced through the example of household centred production,²² and the analysis of “free” migration is another.²³

The notion that the alternatives are somehow “beyond class” can be shown to be a false idea, and it is easy to demonstrate that they do act in their own class interests even if they did not originally see themselves as comprising a class or a movement.

The alternative lifestyle participants were relatively dissociated from party politics and formal election processes for the first twenty years of their settlement in Nimbin. It took me a long time to locate political activity by the alternative lifestyle participants as them acting as a class *for itself* because I was looking in the wrong place for their class-based political activity. Until I identified their subordinate mode of production as being primarily household-centred and their class identity as one of being peasants, their activity appeared individualist and apolitical in class terms. As soon as I looked for their political activity in the domestic domain (as peasants) I found that they were very politically active indeed.

A brief review of the literature and other resources on Nimbin

Research on rural alternative lifestyles in Australia has tended to focus on intentional communities. Dr William (Bill) Metcalf’s is one of Australia’s foremost experts on intentional communities, and he has written and collaborated in many books and articles. In 1987 he completed his PhD thesis, *Dropping Out and Staying In: Recruitment, Socialisation and Commitment Engenderment Within Contemporary Alternative Lifestyles*.

sidelines their work because it is perceived as being “government dominated” and “unfree” research.

²² See HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTION: Alternatives and household production, page 159.

Bill Metcalf has edited several books on communal lifestyles in which people tell their own stories. The book, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality: Co-operative Lifestyles in Australia* (1995) is the most relevant to this research. Together with Frank Vanclay he re-analysed data from several other studies into alternative lifestyles, resulting in the book, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia* (1987) which was published by Institute Applied Environmental Research at Griffith University in Queensland.

I believe that much of the early research and writing on the alternative movement can be seen as counter-cultural practice, in a conscious rejection of “scientism” in favour of the experiential (personal experience). An example of this type of writing is Peter Cock’s *Alternative Australia* published in 1979. Many notable alternative lifestyle members contributed to the book, *The Way Out: Radical Alternatives in Australia*, which was edited by Margaret Smith and David Crossley and published in 1975. The contributors were theorising strategies for new ways of living. The contributions from the collection of papers from a 1980 Australia National University conference on families, *Living Together: Family Patterns and Lifestyles*, edited by Dorothy Davis and Geoff Caldwell, spoke of people’s experiences of trying out those new lifestyles.

Others have concentrated on the communes (intentional communities) to the exclusion of the rest of the alternative lifestyle participants who don’t live communally. Examples of this focus would be social geographer, Dr Alison Taylor’s 1981 book, *Retreat or Advance: New Settlers and Alternative Lifestyles in The Rainbow Region*. Sue Barker & Stephanie Knox, prepared a report *Findings of a Survey of Attitudes of the Dwellers of Multiple Occupancies* for the Lismore City Council in 1985. In Dr Jan Tilden completed her PhD, *Women in Intentional Communities* in 1991, which was based on research undertaken in the mid-1980s.

²³ See MIGRATION: The economic basis of the alternative migration, page 103.

More recently, researchers at the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management at Lismore's Southern Cross University have completed several research papers on Nimbin. Ros Derrett and others have reported on the Mardi Grass Festival at Nimbin for the Lismore City Council's Festival and Event Strategy (1998), and Graham Dunstan has written several papers on community celebrations, including a short history of the alternative lifestyle in Nimbin. Carol de Launey has researched the role of cannabis (and effects of prohibition) in the Nimbin community for her PhD, and in addition has published several papers.²⁴

Other work (film, radio, internet, articles) focuses mainly on social and oral history. As the 20th and 25th anniversaries of the original Aquarius Festival at Nimbin neared there was a proliferation of radio and television programmes on Nimbin. For example the mainstream *Burkes Backyard*, and *Couchman Over Australia* series. Local documentary makers at Gaia Films produced a series called *Nearly Normal Nimbin* that was broadcast nationally. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation Radio National series, *That's History*, did a three-part programme on Nimbin called "Under the Rainbow."

Nimbin News and *Nimbin & Environs* are both published by the Nimbin News Collective. *Nimbin Centenary 1882-1982* was published by the Nimbin District Progress Association in 1982, and Peter Pedals' *Energy From Nature: Renewable Energy Handbook* (now in its 9th Edition) was published by the Rainbow Power Company in 1996.

There is a burgeoning body of material about Nimbin on the internet. The increase in the amount of Nimbin-related information was so pronounced that I graphed it over a three year period (between August 1997 and September 2000).²⁵

²⁴ For full details, see BIBLIOGRAPHY.

²⁵ See COMPUTER-BASED WORK: Web-hits per capita, page 323.

Defining the boundary

I think that many of the problems other researchers have had defining the boundaries of the alternative lifestyle group arise because they are forming their definition on the basis of shared attitudes, rather than looking for the material practices the group members have in common. Many of these approaches see all social phenomena as aggregates of discrete individuals and tend to focus on the aspects of an individual that make them a part of the phenomenon.

That an alternative lifestyle movement exists is beyond doubt. The boundaries are vague since social movements are largely a **personally defined phenomenon**.

Metcalf, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986, 7.4, 124. [Emphasis mine.]²⁶

Many of the people who study alternative lifestyles come from *within* the movement and have considerable sympathy for its aims. I think that much of the research suffers from an over-sensitivity to the differences between the alternative lifestyle groupings, and is due to the writers' identification with the alternative lifestyle. There is an unwillingness to "own" the less worthy aspects of the lifestyle such as drug taking and "dole bludging." Some exclude these negative aspects as not being representative of a true alternative character, and instead they stress the more positive parts of the alternative culture. This has led to an over-emphasis on the ideological nuances within the alternative lifestyle movement.

Alison Taylor (1981) makes distinctions between, and exclusions from, those who comprise the alternative lifestyle/new settler population that my thesis does not. Taylor calls the alternative lifestyle participants in the area "new settlers" and says that "they can be distinguished from hobby farmers and rural retreaters by the smaller capital

²⁶ References to Bill (William) Metcalf's PhD thesis, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986 will give section references as well as page numbers. The reason for this is that Dr Metcalf kindly supplied me with a computer diskette copy of his thesis, which had been translated from Mac to IBM format, and as a result, the formatting of his original were lost.

investment used, and often exist in a co-operative relationship of one sort or another whether temporary or permanent.”⁷⁷

Hippie is a term used by the rest of society to refer to those practising an alternative lifestyle or some aspect of it. In this study a distinction is made between “hippies” and “new settlers” on the basis of their involvement in an alternative lifestyle. “Hippie” refers to that group of gypsy-like people who travel up and down the coast of Australia, often characterised by a lack of employment or permanent dwellings. The term also includes those unemployed drinkers, and drug users, layabouts and vagabonds who are usually not attempting an alternative lifestyle but relying on support from within society most often in the form of social security payments. Other slang terms such as “freak” and “head” are often used in this context.

Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, vi-vii.

Taylor defines the alternative lifestyle as being “characterised by a lack of concern for some conventional values (whether rural or urban) and an emphasis on group and community interactions.” She believes “they are usually less concerned with material possessions and more with alternatives (that is, in contrast to prevalent values or standards) or other than normal possibilities regarding health, agricultural methods, religion and education, as well as other aspects of living that combine to form a lifestyle.”⁷⁸ Bill Metcalf makes a similar definition.

Alternative lifestyle refers to a form of social life which is alternative to that which is followed by most others within the society. As the term is used, it is normally assumed that this choice is for a less individualistic, more sharing style of interaction.

Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality*, 1995, 11.

My materialist definition also includes the group of people that Taylor excluded – namely the group she calls hippies in contradistinction to new settlers, as well as the “new settlers.” The Marxist definition – looking for what people materially share – means that I don’t have to make a series of judgements that excludes some people (for

⁷⁷ Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, vii.

⁷⁸ Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, vii.

example the group Taylor calls the hippies) on the basis of how well they match an ideal type, and whether their ideology and lifestyle choices and goals are within “acceptable” boundaries.²⁹

Without an analysis of the material differences between the populations in the Nimbin area you have to rely on ideological and attitudinal differences to define straight and alternative. I argue that the absence of a materialist definition that includes migration as one of the key attributes of the alternative lifestyle, is one of the interesting features of the analyses of the alternative lifestyle to date. In much of the research migration is implied, but never highlighted as one of the major *defining* material facts shared by members of the rural secular alternative lifestyle. It’s like an invisible given: everyone knows of its existence but it’s not explicitly identified as one of the ways in which you can materially distinguish the alternative lifestyle population from the mainstream.

1.3 My approach to the studying the alternative lifestyle

As I have said, this thesis offers a materialist analysis of the rural alternative lifestyle and its economy. The specific material things that separate the alternative lifestyle as a whole from mainstream society maintain boundaries between straight and alternative cultures. The basis of many of these differences can be traced to the main class-forming process of migration, which has taken place over the last 25 years. Differences between straight and alternative lifestyle cultures are evident to a striking degree when you take into consideration the fact that the alternative lifestyle community actually derives from *within* the mainstream, and the length of time the two groups have lived together. This thesis looks at how those differences play out in people’s lives and how they combine to make the alternative lifestyle participants part of a class group – a class *in itself* – within the area.

²⁹ It must be remembered that Taylor’s book was published in 1981. It would appear that the group known as hippies has changed, in addition to the name that these people prefer to use to describe themselves. See also Metcalf, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986, 1.5, 17.

The people who migrated were from urban areas where they were proletarians and by moving to the Nimbin area they became far less available for absorption into wage labour. So they form a distinct class group, a group mostly without productive property or fulltime paid employment, who never the less survive.³⁰ Urban to rural migration means the alternative lifestyle participants have city attitudes and “needs.” Receiving a benefit or making some kind of non-traditional income from the land are important material differences between the alternative lifestyle culture and the mainstream farming population. Routine use of cannabis means that a higher degree of privacy must be maintained. All of these factors, coupled with the inversion of many of the economic and cultural aspects of the mainstream (anti-consumerism for example) combine to demonstrate the existence of another cultural group in the area.

What is their class?

During the 1990s the common wisdom was that the alternative lifestyle movement was “beyond class.” Alternative politics was “moral” activism – and what they did was not class action. I now think that view was wrong. At the time, like many other Marxists, I thought the alternative lifestyle movement was a maverick schism of the “middle class.” I think this class categorisation is wrong too.

For most wage earners, their legal relation to the means of production does not and can not vary far from their actual (class) relationship to the mode of production. However in the case of the rural alternative lifestyle participant’s juridical relations are less reliable guides to class relationships than usual. A real, material relationship can systematically differ from its supposed legal form to some extent, and a dialectical analysis must try to accommodate such complexities.

³⁰ Later I argue that their benefit entitlement is a type of property, but that it is not productive property but in fact a form of rent-bearing collective property. See, for example, *HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTION: Alternatives and household production*, page 159; *RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT WORK: Benefits as worker subsidies*, page 316; *CLASS POSITION: Pot growers also beneficiaries*, page 411.

Traditional indicators of class include employment, education and income, and ownership of the means of production. When we look at these indicators with regard to the alternative lifestyle community we can see that these don't provide us with consistent grounds for distinctiveness, and what data there is gives a contradictory picture.

The alternative lifestyle participants don't fit neatly into any standard conception of "proletarian," because mostly they are not fulltime wagedworkers and have migrated away from work. While the alternative lifestyle community is well educated, this has not manifested in fulltime employment and high incomes for this group of people. My first notes on the alternative lifestyle participants read:

The alternative lifers do not have an interest in capitalism. They don't like authority, structured work and so on. They are not socialised for work, i.e. they are not proletarian. They are, mode-of-production-wise, more feudal.

Fieldnotes, 1987.

I wondered if an argument could be made that the alternative lifestyle participants make up an ethnic class group, in which their relationship to the prevailing mode of production is directed by elements of their lifestyle, but which is really still part of a larger "parent" class group. Yet the political economy of the alternative lifestyle, their relationship to the capitalist mode of production, does not align their political interests with fully capitalist classes, those formed in the process of capitalist production. Later I came to see them as defined by their exclusion from capitalist production, and hence as lumpen-proletarians.

[S]egments of the excluded sector lack a structural relationship to the means of production and exchange. They live off society. Those in the excluded sector, share a common position in society that gives rise to a similar consciousness, life-style, attitudes, and so on. In a loose sense, then, they tend to form a (highly diversified and individualised) social "class."

Szymanski, *Class Structure: A Critical Perspective*, 1983, 87.

The lumpenproletariat are the group that traditionally includes addicts, prostitutes, drug dealers, beggars, long-term beneficiaries, itinerants, and criminals and the disabled. The

dependence of the many alternative lifestyle people on benefits and on the production of illegal commodities (cannabis) is consistent with their status as lumpen-proletarian. Simply identifying the alternative lifestyle participants as lumpen-proletarians was only a first step to the class analysis. Albert Szymanski included hippies in the lumpenproletariat as more or less voluntary members.

[I]t includes those who could probably hold a regular job if they wanted to, but who elect to subsist from welfare programs (often illegally), part-time bustling of various kinds, and perhaps occasional prostitution or drug dealing, e.g., many hard-core “hippies” ...

Szymanski, *Class Structure: A Critical Perspective*, 1983, 86-7.

I expected that over time a two-class structure would emerge from the alternative population in Nimbin. I had wrongly predicted that by the mid-1990s they would have divided into hip capitalists (reverting to their middle-class origins) and poor migrants (who migrated to survive on low income but did not share “the alternative dream.”) However the alternative community has persisted as an independent group, and has not split into two factions. It was this that made it clear that I needed to locate their class outside of the mainstream Australian class framework.

I had to develop a concrete and meaningful explanation of the class group that had developed in Nimbin and find the reason for its continued survival. This thesis shows that the alternative lifestyle has given rise to a micro-class: a local lumpenproletariat with distinctive characteristics. As a group they share a common relationship to the economic structure, and as such, comprise a class *in itself*. Moreover persons belong to that class only while they remain in Nimbin (that it is a temporary class position).

Summary of Section

This section has provided a brief overview of Nimbin and the scope of this research project. It examined the problems researchers have faced collecting data about Nimbin, and it offered a brief overview of the existing literature on alternative lifestyles in the area. I discussed the way that I approached my research, both theoretically and practically. I examined the way that other researchers have dealt with Nimbin, and how

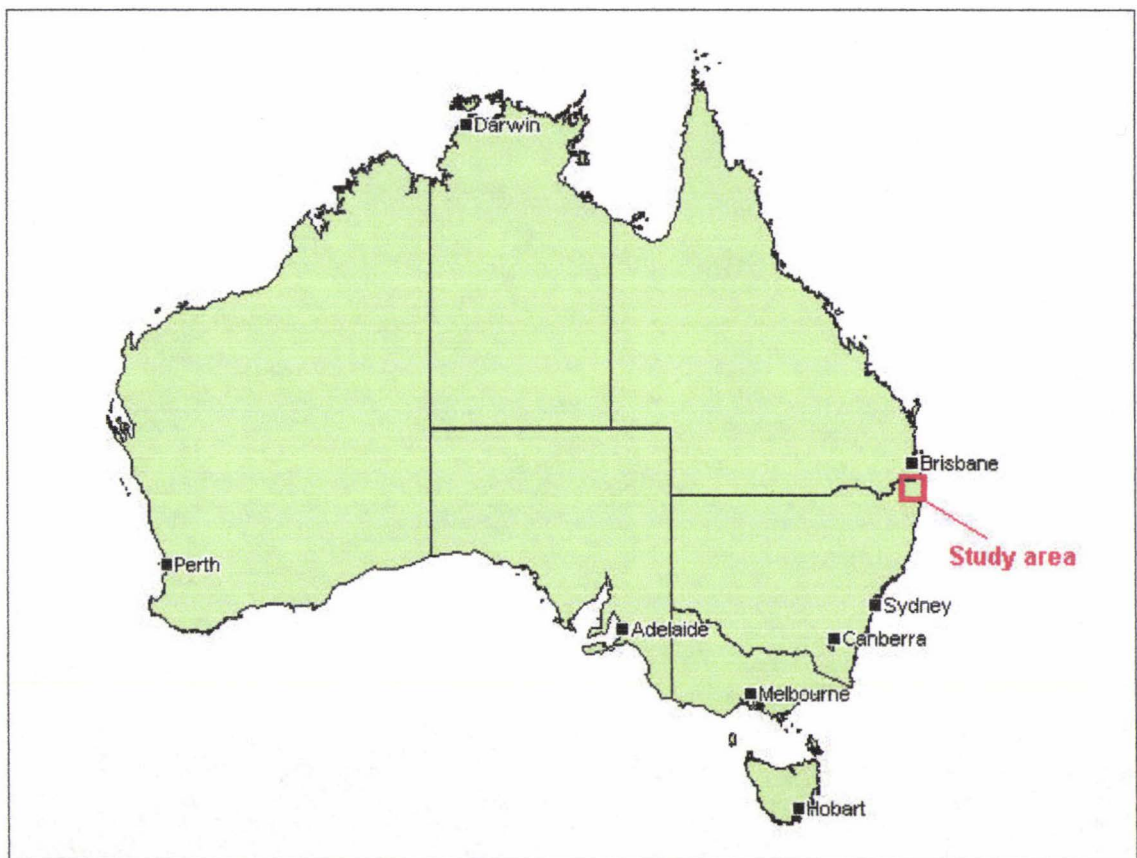
they faced difficulties in “defining” the alternative group. These issues will be revisited in greater depth in Chapter 3, **Class Forming Processes**.

The next chapter, Chapter 2, **Situating Nimbin**, looks at settlement patterns in Nimbin. I look at the history of land-use and at the distance from markets, and argue that standard core-periphery factors influenced settlement patterns.

Chapter 2. Situating Nimbin

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I provide a brief overview of land use prior to the alternative settlement. Using traditional core-periphery theory, I explain how the conditions for the alternative migration to Nimbin came about. The analysis of the macro-economic changes that made the alternative migration possible sets up a framework for later analysis of alternative land-use, migration and tourism in Nimbin.



Nimbin is in an area commonly known as the Rainbow Region. It is a zone mainly in the Northern NSW coastal region, tapering off to some extent towards Coffs Harbour to the South and up into Southern Queensland to the North. It is this area of NSW where there are a large number of alternative lifestyle participants, although alternative lifestyle populations can be found anywhere in Australia. In order to understand how the

alternative lifestyle participants came to live in the Nimbin area we must look to the economic development of the region.

2.1 Settlement patterns

Australia has been mainly populated by recent migrations. Most of that settlement has occurred within the last 200 years, and migrants have primarily (94%) been from European countries. Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders comprise only 1.5% of the Australian population. Australia is one of the most highly urbanised countries in the world. About 85% of Australians live in cities, and four out of every five Australians live on the closely settled coastal plains that make up only about three percent of the country's land area.³¹ As the population density of Australia averages two persons per square kilometre, the average population of *rural* Australia is considerably lower.

The original settlement of Australia by the white pioneers was strongly influenced by the existence of suitable waterways. Navigable rivers had a major impact on what areas were settled by the pioneer farmers. Building roads and railways was expensive and in the early days the rivers were used to move people and produce.³² The other big influence on the development of the transport system, and therefore of settlement and development, was the existence of state boundaries.

Independent states made different investment decisions on their railway networks. For example, the railway gauges (the distance between the rails) were built to different standards in NSW and its neighbouring states.³³ That meant that you could not board a

³¹ Microsoft Encarta 96 Encyclopedia.

³² In Australia many areas are serviced by plane rather than road on account of the time and distances involved and the poor quality of the roads.

³³ Narrow gauge was cheaper, particularly over difficult terrain. These days some portions of the rail line has three tracks - so that trains originating in NSW can continue their run through to Queensland.

train in Sydney and stay on it until Brisbane – everyone and all their luggage – had to be unloaded at the border town of Murwillumbah and re-loaded onto another train.

Likewise, freight had to be unloaded and reloaded, adding extra labour costs to the shipment of goods and produce between states. This meant that produce grown in NSW for city markets was usually freighted by train to Sydney, rather than to the much closer urban centre of Brisbane.

The lack of integration between the states is still in evidence today. Not only is the movement of goods and produce affected, this has had major impacts on the number of tourists that arrive in the area and where they have come from.³⁴ Interstate airline travel tends to go from state capital to state capital, rather than to regional airports.

Significantly there is only one connecting flight between Brisbane and either Casino or Lismore airports a day, despite the fact that it is a five-hour coach ride via the Gold Coast.³⁵ There are 13 flights between Casino and Sydney per week, and 24 between Lismore and Sydney (some of which, as mentioned above) will be shared between the two local airports. The aircraft seats 33 passengers.³⁶

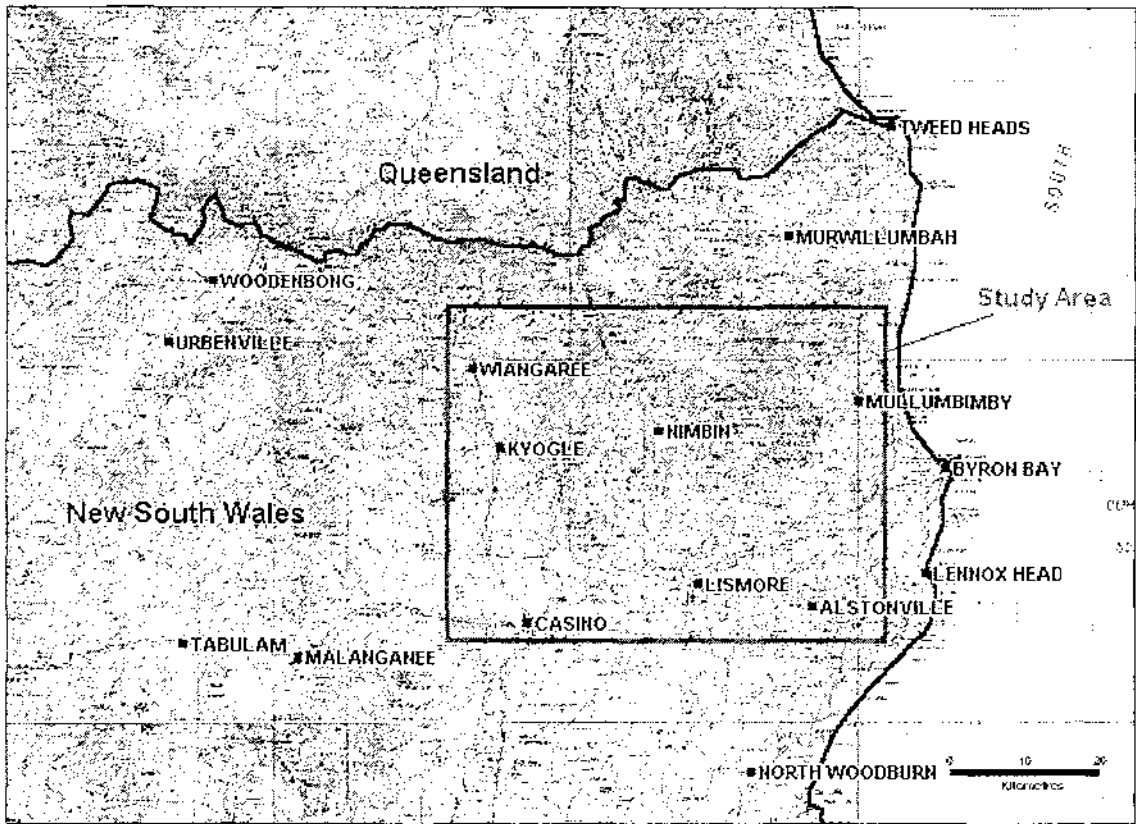
The Rainbow Region adjoins the most rapidly growing area in Australia, the Gold Coast of southeastern Queensland. The rapid growth of this area has absorbed the small towns that were dotted along the coastline. The Gold Coast stretches for over 50 kilometres along the Pacific Ocean coastline from Southport (south of Brisbane) to Tweed Heads (just over the NSW border). The Gold Coast has a lovely winter climate and many beautiful beaches. It has been growing rapidly as a centre for domestic tourism and

³⁴ Including the lack of daylight saving in Queensland.

³⁵ The existence of two airports within 30 km of each other speaks volumes about local politics. Until ten years ago the area was served by the airport at Casino. Then another airstrip was built 4km from Lismore. For many flights, Hazelton Air, a subsidiary of Ansett, is obliged to land at one, then the other. The distance is so short that the landing gear is not retracted, and the plane skims above the trees between airports.

³⁶ 1998 Ansett timetable.

retired persons since the late 1950s. The Gold Coast tourism market has an increasing international profile and there has been a major increase in the number of overseas tourists, particularly now an international airport has been built there.³⁷



The proximity to the Gold Coast has impacted upon the development of the Rainbow Region. The area has become more suitable for retirement migration as the coastal strip settlement has extended down from the Gold Coast into less expensive NSW coastal towns. Tourism too is increasing. This has meant that links to Queensland (and therefore to Brisbane) have been recently strengthened and the effective boundary blurred.

³⁷ The Gold Coast derives its major income from retirement and tourism – restaurants, night-clubs, accommodation, tourist parks, Jupiter’s casino and the Surfer’s Paradise Raceway, a major car racing facility and the like, cater for the tourist market.

2.3 Geological and Aboriginal History of Nimbin

Despite the myth of *terra nullius*, the development of the Australian eco-system has been proven to be the result of long-term land management intervention of the Aborigines.³⁸

The land was exploited, protected, damaged, disturbed and controlled by Aboriginal settlement, and the Australian eco-system is an artefact of their civilisation. This land management was not perceived as productive work despite the fact that it continued for about 110,000 years in the North West.

Land-use patterns for the Aborigines were vastly different from that practised by the first white settlers. The land was owned by everyone, the exploitation of its resources controlled by the rule of law, and customs protected the land.

Teach your children that the earth beneath their feet contains the dust of our ancestors so they will respect the land, which is rich with the lives of our kin.

Burnum Burnum, Statement on the Australian environment, *Nimbin News*, December 1990–January 1991, Back page.

Nimbin is situated in the Southern extension of the Mount Warning caldera.³⁹ Mount Warning is the rocky plug of the original volcano, which has lain dormant for about 22 million years. The Border Ranges form the Western rim of the caldera. To the North are the Lamington Plateau and the Queensland border. Three national parks comprise about three-quarters of the caldera rim, with Mount Warning in the centre. Mount Warning acquired its English name from Captain Cook, as it was the most prominent landmark. Mount Warning is known to the Bundjalung as *Woolumbin* which means “sleeping weather man.”⁴⁰

³⁸ *Terra nullius* is the idea that the land was not owned by anyone and this notion was used to justify the alienation of Aboriginal lands by European colonialists.

³⁹ A caldera is an eroded shield volcano.

⁴⁰ *Nimbin & Environs*, No. 3, December 1996, 16.

The Aboriginal people who lived (and still live) in the Rainbow Region, the Bundjalung, are part of a language group that spread from Newcastle up into Houghton Bay in Queensland.⁴¹ The main hunting grounds of Bundjalung in this area were south of Lismore, where the forests were more open and there was a lot more game. The area to the north of Lismore, including the Nimbin valley, was part of Australia's largest rainforest, known as the "big scrub." The Bundjalung periodically went there to collect seasonal fruit and to harvest medicinal resources.

Once a year the Bundjalung would gather at the coast near Ballina, which lies about 45km from Nimbin. This is the only place in Australia that the Aborigines were known to have very large structures similar to long houses. Each year the long houses would be repaired to accommodate the people who would travel to Ballina for the fishing season. Later, they would return to their traditional hunting grounds.

Every three years, large groups of Bundjalung people would travel into Queensland, to an area 400 kilometres inland from Brisbane for the Bunya nut harvest. The Bunya Pine (*Araucaria bidwilli*) fruits on a three-year cycle, and the cones can weigh up to 11 kilos and contain an average of 120 nuts per cone. As the nuts were rich in oils they were of dietary and social significance, and they were one of the few foods that the Aborigines were known to store. According to a book written in 1889, *Useful Native Plants of Australia*, by J.H. Maiden: –

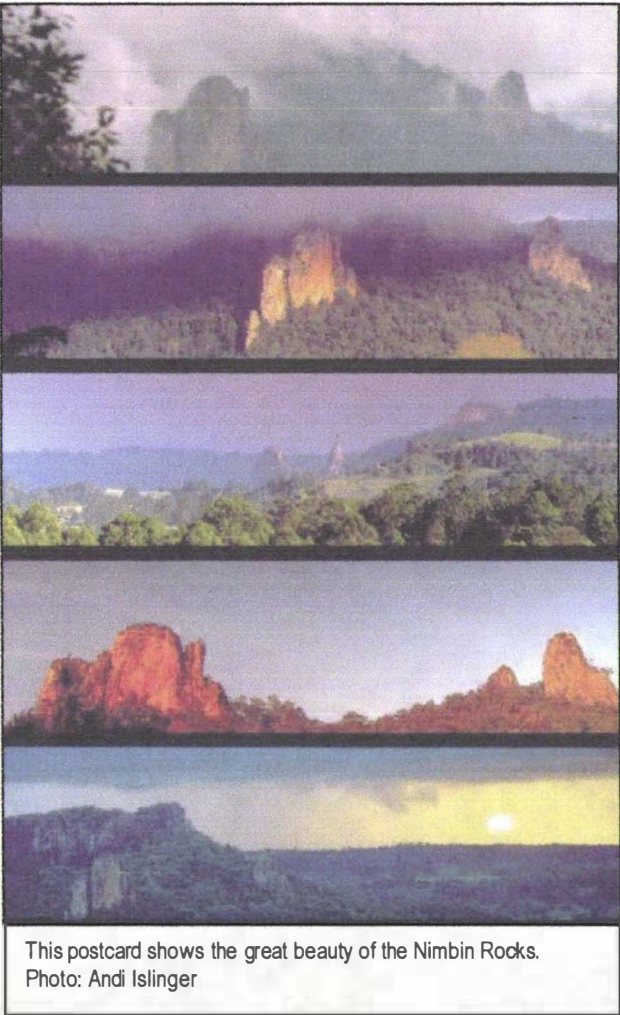
"Each [Aborigine] tribe has its own particular set of trees, and of these each family has a certain number allotted, which are handed down from generation to generation with great exactness. The Bunya is remarkable as being the only hereditary property which any of the aborigines are known to possess, and it is therefore protected by law ..."

Growing Today, November, 1993, 38-39.

⁴¹ This section relies heavily on information gathered by Bob McKay, who researched the history of the Nimbin Valley for his tour-guide business. I am grateful for his permission to record and use it here. Where possible I have supported the information from other sources. See also *Nimbin & Environs*, *Nimbin Centenary 1882-1982*, and *Nimbin News*.

Aborigines valued the Bunya so much that come harvest time warring tribes would cease hostilities and travel enormous distances to take part in feasts. The last of these is said to have taken place in the Bunya Mountains around 1895. Aboriginal groups from areas to the North and the West would all travel to the Bunya nut harvests and up to 30,000 people would attend. During the time of these gatherings, many of the elders would travel to Nimbin for ceremonial activity taking place in the Nimbin valley.

Nimbin as a spiritual place



The topology of the mountain ranges surrounding Nimbin is very important for the Aboriginal people of the area. There are many spectacular geological formations in the area.

The name Nimbin is derived from the Bundjalung Aboriginal word, *Nmbngee*, which means a small, old wise man or pointed rocks.⁴² The Nimbin rocks were the site of sacred practices, initiations, and the testing place of the shamans and mystics.

The shape of the Nightcaps ranges is significant for the Bundjalung Aborigines, and they know it as the sleeping giant. From vantage points on both sides of the ranges you can pick

⁴² Sometimes spelled “Nyimbunje,” and “Gnymbunge.”

shapes suggesting the giants' head, nose, eye socket and brow.⁴³ The Bundjalung saw this geological formation as a message from the gods, saying that this was a place for elders to come and rest. In Aboriginal culture old people are the carriers of wisdom, so Nimbin developed into a very important place for spiritual learning and healing. There are also many burial sites in this area.



1988 saw the first local land transfer ceremony under the Land Rights Act. Pastor Frank Roberts (pictured), a Bundjalung elder, receives title to an area including Nimbin Rocks on behalf of the local Aboriginal people. Photo: Northern Star. [Picture and caption sourced from the 1998 Visions of Nimbin fund-raising calendar.]

Nimbin was the most sacred site of the entire Bundjalung nation. Because of the sacred nature of the Nimbin valley, land use was governed by specific rules. It was forbidden to kill in this area, so if the elders were participating in ceremonies, a young man would be chosen to run in with fresh meat for them each day.

Permanent custodians lived in the Nimbin valley to protect the area. It was forbidden to camp in the Nimbin valley except for ceremonial purposes. People passing through had to first get permission from the custodians, and travel all the way through the valley before darkness fell.

Very few records exist of the first fifty years of white invasion. Given the strong Aboriginal presence in the Nimbin valley, the fact that it was an initiation site, and

the sacred and protected nature of the land, it is probable that there would have been conflict between the white invaders and the Aboriginal guardians. The early colonial

⁴³ This formation can be seen on the skyline of the aerial photograph of Nimbin in MODELING THE ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLE, page 23.

administration in Australia suppressed the Aboriginal culture. The struggle over land and timber resources (in combination with hostile attitudes) have meant that much of the Bundjalung culture was lost as the land was taken from Aboriginal guardianship.

In 1985 the Nimbin Rocks were the subject of a land claim by the local Aboriginal Land Council, and the Nimbin Rocks were returned to the Bundjalung people. The lower of the three Nimbin Rocks was brought back by the Aboriginal Land Council from private ownership.⁴⁴ Today there is a small Aboriginal community living near the Nimbin Rocks, including a permanent custodian and his family, and Bundjalung people may come and stay at the settlement if they wish.

Alternatives and Kooris

You would expect that the Aborigines would see a lot of value in the alternative culture, yet by and large they haven't yet been included in its scope. I think this is largely because of the class differences between the populations. As one of the people who talked to me about the relationship between Aborigines and the alternatives remarked,

[W]e all think we're wonderful and way-out and freaks or alternatives ... but to the Kooris we must look like middle-class white people from the city, to a greater or lesser degree.

Interview with Micky, October 1997

While very few Kooris become "alternatives," aspects of their lives overlap with the alternative culture. An alliance has been forged between the Aboriginal people at Nimbin and the alternative lifestyle community, and they have co-operated to protect the land and forests in the area. In 1982, when a proposal was made to log the forest in the Nightcap Range, the Bundjalung people and the alternative lifestyle participants joined together to fight it.



In 1982 when logging was being proposed in the Nightcap Range above Nimbin, Bundjalung elder, Lyle Roberts, performed a protective ceremony at the gateposts installed to close off access to the forest. The posts were carved before the gate went up! Logging contractors were met with blockades until the Land and Environment Court stopped work after only one week. This was followed closely by the Rainforest Protection Legislation and the declaration of the Nightcap National Park, now classified World Heritage. [Picture and caption sourced from the 1998 Visions of Nimbin fund-raising calendar.]

The alternative lifestyle community celebrated the Year of the Indigenous Person with the Kooris. Land rights are supported by the alternative community. This is in contrast to the local straight community who view the changing legislation with considerable anxiety. Many alternative people get involved in land-rights activity. In the case described by Sophia Hoeben in the quote below, political action at Parliament highlighted some of the issues of the exploration and mining of Aboriginal land.

I found myself with a small group of people digging up the lawns of Parliament House, searching for oil and minerals on white man's "sacred ground" and was arrested for the first time in my life. [Sophia Hoeben.]

"Tales from an accidental radical," *Nimbin News*, October-November 1990, 6.

⁴⁴ John Roberts, Chairman Far North Coast Regional Aboriginal Land Council, *Nimbin & Environs*, No. 2, July 1993, 5.

The claiming of England on behalf of the Aboriginal people on January 26, 1988 by Aboriginal activist Burnum Burnum (in a satirical re-enactment of the English annexation of Australia by decree) was cheered by the alternative community. It was a powerful symbolic act and caught the attention of the worlds' media.

And while he stood on the White Cliffs of Dover he planted the red, yellow and black Aboriginal flag. Then he read his parody, scripted like the US declaration of Independence. It began, "I, Burnum Burnum, being a nobleman of ancient Australia, do hereby take possession of England on behalf of the Aboriginal people."

Afrocentric Studies Research Group Website.⁴⁵

During my May-June 1998 fieldtrip many alternative people were involved in preparations for Sorry Day. Sorry Day was a day to acknowledge the injustices done to the Aboriginal people by white settlers, and to be the beginning of a process of reconciliation. A million Australians marched over the Sydney Harbour Bridge on the 26th of May 1998 in support of Aboriginal grievances. Nimbin Women for Reconciliation arranged for a Sorry Book to be available for people to sign.⁴⁶ Sorry Day activity in Nimbin was within the broad tradition of Koori-alternative interaction.

Two things we are most proud of. First, we asked permission to have a Festival, and second, we asked the indigenous people to come—and they did! Someone said to me, "youse blokes started reconciliation."

Nimbin News, June-July 1998, 10.

The acquisition of some aspects of Aboriginal belief by the alternative culture is an interesting facet of the alternative lifestyle. Local people speak of Nimbin as a place of learning.⁴⁷ There is the belief that people come here to learn and then leave, taking with them "what they need to know to continue their life's journey." Nimbin mythology (both

⁴⁵ <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Olympus/8192/burnum.html>

⁴⁶ "Sorry Day," *Nimbin News*, April-May 1998, 7.

⁴⁷ *Nimbin & Environs*, No. 3, 1996, 6-9; *Nimbin Centenary 1882-1982*, 1982, 121.

ancient and modern) has it that only the truly wise will remain in Nimbin (as teachers of wisdom) and others will come here for “initiation.”

The idea of Nimbin as a centre for learning and growth though, it isn't new. For the original inhabitants, the Bundjalung people, the Nimbin dreaming always was and always will be.

Aquarius Revisited: Under the Rainbow – Still Dreaming, That's History Programme, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1993.

This absorption of selected aspects of the Aboriginal culture and its integration with alternative ideologies acts to (retrospectively) legitimate aspects of the alternative culture. It has the interesting effect that the Aboriginal cultural belief is now perpetuated and transmitted by the alternative lifestyle culture, from one alternative lifestyle participant to another, rather than by the Kooris themselves. These beliefs include aspects of learning and healing, of land-care and spirituality. Those beliefs and practices are sometimes incorporated with customs from other cultures that are also significant to the alternative lifestyle culture.

First fire makers and didgeridoo players came forward. The fire makers called in the fire spirits, using only two sticks in the ancient traditional manner. This fire was then carried by seven children to seven Agni Hotra fires (ancient Vedic ritual fires) which were lit for purification and re-energising of the land.

Mark, Rainbow Gathering at Om Shalom.⁴⁸

Openness to other cultural idioms is an identifying aspect of alternative culture. The fire-lighting example shows how alternative cultural practice can unite the fire ceremonies of Hindu culture with the culture of Aboriginals. Another example sees a comparison drawn between Aboriginal initiation and Hopi Indian belief, and then further ties those practices to crystal therapy.

The final ordeals of the initiation ceremonies of the shamans would take place at Nimbin Rocks. In most other areas such ceremonies took place within caves, but in

⁴⁸ Sourced from <http://www.nimbin.net/dream/photo26.htm>. This piece was part of the *Some Children of the Dream* collection with the note that it was reprinted from *Tribe* magazine, 1996.

this area the initiation ordeal took place atop the Nimbin Rocks. The shamans would have to climb up there and sit on top and have to prove they could levitate. According to Aboriginal lore, when the shamans went into the caves or into their special position on the rocks, they were in a trance state, they had a (spiritual or gods) spear come through the back of their heads and shatter the nasal cavity and thus opened up their minds to the occult powers, and give them extra powers for healing and these types of things. There is something like this with the Hopi Indian in America as well.

To symbolically show that they had passed this test, they'd put a chunk of quartz crystal at the back of their tongue, and at Nimbin, they would be given a big chunk of quartz crystal as a totem. Once they were given this no one was ever able to view it or touch it. There was also talk of them putting quartz crystals inside their bodies, at the meridians, to give them extra powers as well.

Bob McKay, November 1996.

According to Bob McKay, a lot of the local alternative lifestyle people believe that this was a test of mental activity, like telepathy or astral travelling. This accords with the idea of "magical" influences in the area, and its subsequent revival as a spiritual centre after the Aquarius Festival.

The Kooris had returned, in fulfilment of the old Aboriginal promise that they would do so once the people of Nimbin became as "trusting and innocent as little children." [Jennie Dell.]

Nimbin News, June-July 1998, 3.

For some alternative lifestyle participants in the area, Aboriginal beliefs and practices have retrospectively validated their decision not to eat meat; to act as custodians of the land; and their portrayal of Nimbin as a place of learning and healing. The acquisition of Koori culture is of course, highly selective: aspects of Aboriginal culture that do not correspond with, or contradict, valued alternative beliefs are not adapted and reproduced. An argument could be made for the alternative settlers appropriating and assimilating aspects of Aboriginal culture out of context, and making them their "own," as being a continuation of the practice of white settlers exploiting the Aborigines. The alternative lifestyle settlers, because they are settling during the information-economy stage of Australian capitalism rather than the imperialist and farming stages, don't have to physically take things off the Kooris. The appropriation of aspects of Aboriginal

culture by alternatives doesn't require the expropriation of them. The alternative lifestyle participants assimilate aspects of Koori culture to give their own ideologies more power.

The use of cannabis is a cultural activity common to both ethnic groups. The 1996 cannabis law reform festival, MardiGrass, was held at the Nimbin Rocks site.⁴⁹ The organisers asked the Bundjalung guardians to officially open the festival and Aboriginal cultural groups were invited to perform at the festival.

The official opening will include the raising of the National Aboriginal flag which will fly throughout the fiesta in respect to the original inhabitants and their wisdom in living on this land. ... A memorial fire will be lit by rubbing sticks and this too will burn throughout the entire MardiGrass ...

Press Release, MardiGrass Website, 1996.⁵⁰

A pro-community ideology is shared by both cultural groups, and liberal attitudes allow the alternative lifestyle community to share and transmit aspects of Aboriginal culture. *Nimbin News* regularly features Aboriginal news, which keeps the local community abreast of the activities and opinions of the Kooris. Locals have helped give voice to Aboriginal culture through festivals, film, magazine interviews, music recordings and graphic arts.⁵¹

2.4 White settlement

Timber getters

The Richmond River was “discovered” by European gold diggers and explorers in 1840. While gold was not found in significant quantities, explorers found a major timber resource. The Nimbin valley was part of “the big scrub” and was rich in red cedar trees. Red cedar was known at the time as red gold and it was the most valuable of all of the

⁴⁹ See TOURISM: Festivals, page 287.

⁵⁰ <http://www.midac.com.au/nimbin/media2.html>

⁵¹ See PRODUCTIVE CORE FOR THE “HIPPIE NATION:” Filmmakers, page 368.

Australian timbers. The logging workers made their way up the river systems: using the rivers and creeks as highways into the middle of the rainforest. Later bullock trains hauled the logs to Lismore, a five-day journey. There they put the logs in the river and floated them down to the estuary from where the timber was exported.

Pioneer farmers

Behind the timber workers came waves of pioneer settlers, who cleared the land for grazing. By now dairy technology had improved sufficiently to make the production of butter and cheese cheap enough to be affordable to the masses. The burgeoning market for dairy products in the core “home” country meant increasing demands for the milk products exported from the periphery of the empire. Pioneer settler families came to



[Picture sourced from the 1998 Visions of Nimbin fund-raising calendar.]

Nimbin looking for dairy land. The dairy industry established very quickly, and in 1909 a co-operative butter factory was built on the outskirts of the township.

The land in the Nimbin area was distributed to white settler farmers in a process known as “taking a selection.” In 1861 a law was passed to promote the settlement of land by farmers. By this legislation a man [and under rare circumstances a woman] could freely choose or select between 40 and 320 acres of Crown Land, for which he had to pay one pound per acre, and

guarantee to live on his land for a minimum of one year to prove that he intended to farm it.⁵¹

Between 1891 and 1906 lessons were taught in Hugh Thorburn’s barn. In 1903 Nimbin was sub-divided from Thorburn’s (a settler-farmer) selection, and gazetted in 1906.⁵² In

⁵¹ Middleton, *But Now We Want The Land Back*, 1977, 58-59.

1906 a school was built on two acres of land that he donated to the Department of Public Instruction. In 1910 the main school building and the teachers' residence were built. By then the school had 120 pupils. A post office was established in 1899, the Nimbin Hall was built for the Nimbin School of Arts in 1904.⁵⁴ Between 1909 and 1914 four churches were built, and the NSW State Bank set up business in the town. It wasn't until 1917 that a cottage hospital was established, and (relatively late) 1926 until the hotel was built.



Detail from an exhibit at the Nimbin Museum protesting at climate change due to deforestation.
Photo: Ben Rotteveel.

When settler farmers took up their selections they ring-barked the remaining trees on their properties. The clearing of the trees on grazing land has resulted in climate change and soil degradation, and is considered by some environmentalists as one of Australia's biggest ecological disasters.

[T]he once expansive rainforests of the area have now been reduced to scattered remaining pockets including the Terania Creek area. [It is estimated] that at the time of settlement, the area of rainforest in the North Coast region was 725,000 hectares. By 1974, only 80,000 hectares remained.

Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 25

Over the next seventy years a number of things occurred that made serious inroads into the agricultural economy. The first of these was the First World War. Recruitment in rural Australia enlisted suitable men from the local district into the same regiment. This

⁵³ *Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982*, 1982, 16.

⁵⁴ The existence of the Nimbin School of Arts as early as 1904 shows a cultural interest and involvement by Nimbin people in performance arts that pre-dated the settlement of the area by the alternative lifestyle population by more than half a century. This long-standing cultural heritage might help explain how the alternatives came to find a home in Nimbin.

made them particularly vulnerable to being killed or injured *en masse*. It had a huge impact on rural Australia when the future working generation of several neighbouring families was destroyed at one blow. The family names on the war memorial stones in small towns all over Australia tell this story, and Nimbin is no different.

In the mid-1920s many Italian men migrated from Queensland to grow bananas. Due to climate change from deforestation, frosts now occurred in the valleys so they planted the bananas on the hillsides. Erosion meant that there was often the added labour of carrying soil up the hill in which to plant the banana shoot.⁵⁵ There was an economic boom in Nimbin during the 1930s when the banana plantations became productive.

By the end of 1933 Nimbin had acquired electric lighting and a police station. The Norco dairy company had opened a butter factory, producing 40 tonnes of butter a week, and an ice plant producing 300 blocks of ice a week. The local sawmill employed 12 workers, and banana production was in excess of 3000 cases a month. The town boasted a Country Women's Association branch, a Junior Farmers Club, a Show Society, and a Parents and Citizens group. There were several sports groups, including football, cricket, bowls, tennis, hockey and croquet and there were plans afoot to form a golf club.⁵⁶ A *Northern Star* advertising feature from this time revealed a profile of a thriving town.

Three general stores, a drapery and mercery house, two bakeries, four fruiterers and refreshment rooms, two hair-dressers, a billiard saloon, a butchers shop, two garages, a hotel, a newsagency, a saddler, two blacksmiths, two tailors, a tinsmith, two banks, two boot repairers, a dentist, a post office, a daily mail service, and a School of Arts.

"Golden Times Recalled," *Northern Star*, 6 June 1998, 14.

Factors such as soil exhaustion and erosion, easier growing conditions closer to the market and lower prices for bananas gradually killed off the banana growing industry. In

⁵⁵ *Nimbin Centenary 1882-1982*, 1982, 33; Trustrum, *In and Around Bentley*, 1985, 180-181.

⁵⁶ "Golden Times Recalled," *Northern Star*, 6 June 1998, 14.

any case, few of the children of the banana growers wanted to continue in the increasingly arduous business of banana production, and typical of second and third generation migrants, many left to find work in the cities.

Then came World War II, when Australians were again called to defend the “empire.” This was followed by another major economic depression that seriously impacted on the dairy industry and resulted in a change of focus for farmers from dairying to other kinds of farming. In response to the improving meat export industry, many farmers began to change over to beef farming, a process beginning around the mid-1940s and continuing until the 1970s. Raising beef cattle uses more land less intensively than dairy farming, and therefore requires fewer workers. Around this time, too, many small dairy farms were amalgamated into bigger farms.

Government assistance to the industry has remained largely ineffective, with measures such as the introduction of the Dairy Industry Authority having relatively few positive effects. Other attempts such as mechanisation and the introduction of bulk handling facilities have in fact appeared to have detrimental effects. ...

Many dairy farmers saw government attempts at rationalisation as instituting a policy of “expand or get out” which spelt the end of the traditional small farmer and family dairy farm.

Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 30.

Uneven capitalist development (the domination of the rural periphery by the core) destroyed the rural economy, which then acted as a trigger for urbanisation. This resulted in the migration of many agricultural workers from rural areas to the job markets of the cities. The local shires were de-populating on a massive scale in the 1970s. The Terania Shire, of which Nimbin was a part, lost 12.1% of its population in the period between 1966 and 1971.⁵⁷

The property was progressively cleared for dairying, starting about a century ago. By the late thirties the steep hills were fully cleared and supporting 100 dairy cows and 60 acres of bananas. But by 1970 the place had virtually no value in conventional

⁵⁷ Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 27.

agricultural terms. Dairying had gone out in the fifties, the banana slopes were degraded, eroded and capable of supporting only weeds, and beef wasn't worth sending to town. [Leigh Davison.]

Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality*, 1995, 42.

It was the very destruction of the rural economy that has enabled the alternative lifestyle participants to establish in the Nimbin area. The migration process was two-way: traditional farmers were driven out to find work in the cities, and alternative settlers arrived from the urban centres.

When this rural to urban migration happened in Australia, the *most* urbanised country in the world, it allowed scope for a smaller back-migration to the countryside, and the rejuvenation of the semi-abandoned rural infrastructure. It was the declining demand for workers *overall* (structural unemployment) that expelled the alternative lifestyle seekers from the cities to Nimbin – a centrifugal (away from centre) rather than centripetal (towards centre) force.

2.5 The influence of core-periphery development patterns

The distortion of the rural economy – the inability of the rural economy to support itself without outside intervention, the declining political and economic importance of the rural and agricultural sector, and the increased demand for workers in the city – are clear factors in the decline of rural townships like Nimbin.

The dependency on agriculture meant that the region was vulnerable to the changing world market position of Australian produce. For a very long time, the rural sector was politically over-represented in the way the electoral boundaries were drawn.⁵⁸ This

⁵⁸ The falling importance of the agricultural sector to the national economy was reflected in the eventual collapse of the electoral gerrymander in Queensland. The gerrymander in Queensland was the result of how electoral boundaries were drawn. They were constructed so that it took fewer rural voters to elect an MP than city voters. This allowed a greater influence to the traditionally more conservative rural voters than their city counterparts. In

reflected the importance of the agricultural sector to the national economy. Its collapse marked the loss of the last powerful bastion of political and economic strength of the rural economy.

Australian [sic] once “rode on the sheep’s back” as national prosperity rose with commodity prices following the Second World War. In the 1950’s, agriculture represented 14 percent of Australia’s gross domestic product (GDP), but now it is only 3 percent.⁵⁹

“Outback revolt threatens political establishment,” *Evening Post*, 14 July 1998, 9.

The local economy was formerly dependent on the rural sector, but the rural sector now only employs 7.3% of the total labour force. These days the majority of local employment is in the service sector and wholesale and retail sectors – together accounting for over half of all jobs. Significant employers include the government – State and Commonwealth agencies (particularly in the health, education and social welfare sectors) – local government, financial and legal services, the retail sector, and light engineering sectors.

Lismore has a shifting economic diversity with the majority of employment occurring in the service sector (31.8%) followed by wholesale/retail sector which employs 21% of the workforce. Its traditional rural sector is undergoing major structural change and employs 7.3% of the total labour force (ABS 1991 census data). Rural industries in the area include dairying, beef cattle, macadamia, avocado and tropical fruit.

Amanda Kenyon & Luke Maunder, *Lismore Food Processing Business Incubator: Feasibility Study*, c1995.⁶⁰

other words, a country vote was worth more than a city one. See Coaldrake, *Working the System: Government in Queensland*, 1989.

⁵⁹ From a rural report by the Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission.

⁶⁰ This study was prepared for the Lismore Business Enterprise Centre, and I obtained it from the internet: http://www.nor.com.au/business/gbec/lismore_food_processing.htm. There is no publication date on the document or in the metafile of the HTML. The most recent date mentioned in the text is 1995. I downloaded the file on 24 January 2000.

Some of the traditional farmers were unable to make a living at farming, or were too indebted to make the necessary investments to change over to another form of farming, and were forced to leave their land. The result of this was that the alternative settlers could afford to purchase the land (either individually or collectively) and simply live there without having to extract a living out of it.

In the early period of settlement by the alternative migrants Nimbin exhibited some of the classic symptoms of a periphery. These symptoms include rural poverty, low wages, chronic under-employment and unemployment, poor health and a high incidence of preventable disease, high fertility, sub-standard housing, over half the population still living on the land, and a history of migration, together with a vulnerable economy. This profile is more typical of Third World economies.

Twenty-five years after the original alternative settlement of the area sees that land restored and reforested, and it can be used in more intensive non-traditional ways like permaculture. Similarly, many of the children of the original farming families use the land in different ways to those of their parents. The continued decline in the old way of life is shown in the results of a 1998 land-use survey.

The conclusions reached are as follows: - Beef cattle grazing is not seen as an important economic activity in the Nimbin area (68%), and grazing was not seen as a viable alternative to intensive agricultural production (62%). 68% perceived the current industry downturn to be long term and 62% did not consider that the local beef industry contributes to the social wellbeing and a sense of community, nor does it enhance the communities lifestyle and recreation opportunities (78%).

Mark Roucky, "The Local Beef Industry," *Nimbin News*, February-March 1998, 29.

The continued peripheral status of Nimbin is revealed in the fact that 70% of food is imported despite the fact that Nimbin was once a net exporter of food.⁶¹ Power is sourced from 700 kilometres away in the Hunter Valley, despite the local availability of cheap power from nature (wind, sun, water) and the availability of locally produced

⁶¹ "Lismore's Own City Farm," *Nimbin News*, June-July 1996, 24.

technologies for harnessing that energy.⁶² There is a high level of dependency on one primary crop (cannabis) and if this crop fails to make it to market then the local economy suffers as a result. For a variety of reasons the number of people whose main income is a benefit is much higher in this area than the national average.

Under-development and subsidies

The Rainbow region is heavily dependent on government subsidies. These include (the usually forgotten) development and agricultural subsidies, as well as on welfare benefits. Later I will argue that the multi-million dollar drug enforcement program acts as another form of subsidy for the rural economy.⁶³

The support of the rural sector by core capital (through the agency of the state) can be seen in the level of benefit dependence in the area. Estimates suggest that between 30-49% of the Nimbin population receive some kind of social security benefit.⁶⁴ It is important to remember that social security benefit support is more than just the dole: it can include a wide variety of pensions – old age, disability and illness pensions, supporting parents and widows benefits and so on. Even more important is that, as Australian citizens, social security benefits are a legal right to which they are fully entitled.

The rural subsidies that support agricultural production as an industry (rather than supporting individuals) are less visible than subsidies supporting individuals (unemployment, supporting parents and sickness beneficiaries). Consider, for example, the drought relief packages, farm household support and farm family restart schemes

⁶² Robyn Francis, *From Aquarius Dreaming to Nineties Reality: Nimbin's Coming of Age, 1977*, 2.

⁶³ See CANNABIS CROPPING: Introduction, page 228.

⁶⁴ In mid-1999 Dudley Leggett suggested that 49% of the population in the area was dependent upon a benefit of some kind. "Dudley Leggett talks about the past and the future," *Nimbin News*, June-July 1999, 10. It is important to note that these figures include non-alternative people too.

have been administered through CentreLink on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Australia.⁶⁵ These are all subsidies that don't attract the opprobrium of "being on the dole" and are therefore less visible. In addition there are trade and import tariffs protecting Australian-made products and therefore local industry. While fewer of these rural subsidies exist now than did formerly (due to the falling importance of the rural sector to gross domestic product) they still have a significant impact on the shape of rural life in Australia.

A complete collapse of the rural sector is harmful to the urban capitalist centres because (among other reasons) governmental agencies are forced to prop up the rural economy. In 1998 the National-Liberal Government budgeted \$A1 billion to subsidise the rural economy in the face of a crisis in the countryside.⁶⁶

The opening of a new timber mill in nearby Tuncester shows the importance of government subsidies to rural development.⁶⁷ In this case, the Hurfords Timber and Building Company obtained a major grant from the Forest Industry Structural Adjustment Package, a joint State-Commonwealth Government fund. Hurfords plan is to produce value-added hardwood timber products for export. This is a change from the simple exploitation of the past, and in response to the diminishing availability of millable wood and to the recession in the timber industry.⁶⁸ The mill cost a total of \$6 million to redevelop, and created 19 new jobs.

⁶⁵ Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, *Customers: A Statistical Overview*, 1998, 75-76.

⁶⁶ "Outback revolt threatens political establishment," *Evening Post*, 14 July 1998, 9.

⁶⁷ "Timber Triumph: Mill shows the way of the future," *Northern Star*, 11 June 1998, Front-page; "The good wood on Hurfords," *Northern Rivers Echo*, 4 June 1998, Front-page.

⁶⁸ The reduction of available millable forest, and the subsequent focus on resource sustainability, is due in part to the activities of the alternative migrants and their environmental activities.

Credit where credit is due, the government (State and Federal) helped in no small way courtesy of a \$1 million grant from a timber industry restructure fund. We have often spoken of the need for well-placed government incentives to new business to spark investment and growth. This is one example of how it can work in the industry-needy Northern Rivers.

Editorial, *Northern Star*, 11 June 1998, 6.

A feasibility study into establishing a food processing business incubator in Lismore identified potential sources of financial support from various local, state and federal agencies.⁶⁹ These included potential Commonwealth government funding from the Department of Employment, Training and Further Education, and the Office of Labour Market Adjustment; State funding through Department of Business and Regional Development, and Department of Training and Education Co-ordination; and local government funding through the Lismore City Council. The identification of potential sources of funding are important because they show that the desired development of the regional and rural areas of Australia will not naturally occur and that it will require financial incentives and backing of governmental agencies.

⁶⁹ Amanda Kenyon & Luke Maunder, *Lismore Food Processing Business Incubator: Feasibility Study*. http://www.nor.com.au/business/gbec/lismore_food_processing.htm. c1995.

Chapter 3. Class-forming processes

3.0 Introduction

This chapter examines the boundaries of the alternative movement in order to generate a useful definition of alternative lifestyle participant. Clearly there is a community of people who share a common lifestyle, and who, in some sense or another, do constitute the alternative lifestyle movement. I establish a definition of the alternative lifestyle participants based not on what alternative lifestyle participants think of themselves but on the *material* elements of their lives.

There is a lack of agreement over the composition of the alternative lifestyle community, and in this chapter I examine why other researchers have trouble identifying the alternative lifestyle participants. The definition of “the alternative lifestyle participant” is problematic if you start from the study of the attributes and attitudes of individuals instead of seeing the concrete material elements that combine to construct the alternative lifestyle participants as a social group or class.

The weakness of the other research done on the alternative lifestyle is that it still attempts to define the phenomenon of the alternative lifestyle movement as a collection of individuals. From this perspective it is a complicated and difficult problem because ideologically they are an extremely complex and diverse population. Although they have some things in common, a great deal of work has to be done in teasing out those commonalities. Once you’ve done that work it is still a rather weak set of tools for analysing the whole question of who comprise the alternative community.

If you take the approach of treating the phenomenon as primary and the individuals as secondary, then the question of their inclusion or exclusion within the alternative lifestyle group is not in itself such a big one, and falls well within an orthodox Marxist approach.

When you consider a class, the question of whether particular individuals are members of a class is not the key question. Nor do we have to rely primarily on what they report

about themselves. It is the social relations that constitute and produce the class that actually define the class.⁷⁰ The class-forming processes that generated the alternative lifestyle migration to Nimbin are a by-product of the capitalist mode of production. The class that they have formed, that I think of as the *benefit peasantry*, shares a common material position within capitalism.

The emergence of the alternative lifestyle population in Nimbin is a complex of class-forming processes. The main class-forming process is the exclusion of persons from capitalist production. The movement of labour power out of capitalist production in the cities and its transfer to a rural area means they have to make a living by non-traditional means. This is what their exclusion from the capitalist labour process actually involves. The economics of this class forming process is the main focus, and migration is the primary causal phenomenon. Other aspects of the alternative lifestyle are secondary, and ought to be seen as derived phenomena, as products of the primary class-forming process of migration.

Individuals become part of the class primarily through migrating. The high level of education and the white-collar class backgrounds have been related to the self-selection of individuals to be non-working proletarians. The high dependency upon benefits can be related to their self-selection as persons who will migrate from the city to live, and after having migrated, for them to obtain a living. These material processes lead to the existence of the alternative lifestyle group in the Rainbow Region.

While it might not seem that the question of different domestic priorities or different politics adds a lot to the differences that you would already expect from differences between urban dwellers and rural dwellers, in fact there exist particular versions of politics and domesticity. Green politics and anti-materialism are both different from “mainstream” urban class politics, and impact upon how alternative lifestyle participants actually live out their lives. Likewise cultural differences reinforce and inform the alternative culture, and translate into identifiably alternative practices and responses.

⁷⁰ For an extended discussion on these topics see CLASS IN ITSELF, page 403.

The distinctive lifestyle, the ecological consciousness, cannabis use and production and benefit dependency *are* the phenomena, not the individuals that make it up. These factors are a complex of inter-related processes that impact more or less heavily on particular individuals.

3.1 How I define the alternative lifestyle participants

Being a Marxist I seek to define the alternative lifestyle *primarily* by the material, rather than ideological things they share. This simplifies my task. An emphasis on the material aspects of the alternative culture directs our attention to things like migration, sources of income, employment and ownership of property, and *then* to the cultural practices that both result from and underpin these economic activities. All of these aspects of the alternative lifestyle move us from an *ideological description* to a *material analysis*. Also, because these material and economic factors are *relational* rather than *attributional* they allow a definition of the alternative lifestyle group by social relationships rather than as a set of individual people.

The group I am discussing has several levels of boundaries that differentiate them (as a group or class) from the mainstream “straight” rural inhabitants. My attention is focussed on the class-forming processes that have combined to create the alternative lifestyle class in the Nimbin area, rather than the individuals who comprise that class. All these factors combine and interact to form the alternative lifestyle participants into an identifiable local micro-class. These features include: –

- Their status as urban to rural migrants (a reversal of standard migration patterns)
- The different culture that their urban background entails
- Their non-traditional, and often “urban” means of earning a living in a rural area
- Their land ownership patterns
- Their cultural “deviancy” (their inversion of some of the norms of mainstream society)
- Their use of recreational drugs as a cultural practice

- Their unique class position (in terms of their relationship to the means of production)
- Their level of education (unusually high for some participants vis-à-vis their rural location)
- Their different political orientation to that of the host community
- Their higher than average dependency on welfare benefits

Rather than looking at ideological features as *aspects* that might or might not apply to this or that person, you can see the practices that produce those phenomena as bound together into a single class-forming process. The inter-dependency of these facets of the alternative lifestyle means that you cannot see them as a causal chain: you cannot start at the first characteristic and go by simple progression to the second, then the third, and so on through to the end. Instead, there is a causal web, whereby several factors intersect to form and sustain others.

So while it is impossible to draw exact boundaries between the “straight” and “alternative” populations I argue that you can usefully determine “straight” from “alternative” without having to make a series of judgements on their ideologies. However, how do we deal scientifically with the real-world vagueness of whether a person is “alternative” or not? The answer to this question lies in the use of a definition formed from multiple factors.

A definition of alternative lifestyle at an individual level can be generated by using as variables the characteristics that are common to the alternative lifestyle participants. Each variable is weighted and the inclusion or exclusion of individuals can be judged against these standards.⁷¹ The boundaries are drawn in terms of a series of continua based on several important and inter-acting features of the local class-forming processes

⁷¹ These criteria can have different degrees of importance, which can be thought of like the “degree of difficulty” multiplier used in judging sports like diving, gymnastics and ice skating.

of the alternative culture, rather than on a single criterion. From this, different degrees of inclusion and exclusion can be established, based on material facts of the lives of these rural inhabitants.

By choosing variables that relate to the relevant class-forming processes – like “migrant to area,” “has used cannabis,” “opposes cannabis prohibition,” “does not farm beef or dairy,” “receives a benefit,” “opposes native forest logging,” for example – it is possible to create a matrix of inter-related features of the lifestyle which together define an alternative lifestyle participant.

The more primary factors (like migration) warrant a greater emphasis than particular cultural practices like, say, vegetarianism, even though vegetarianism is widely practised by this group. This lower importance assigned to vegetarianism is attributed because the alternatives could all become carnivores without significantly altering their relationship to the mode of production.

Some of the criteria are derived, that is, they are a consequence of some other, more important factor, such as migration. Derived features include their non-traditional way of earning a living in the country, welfare dependency, household structure, and their political and ideological orientations because without migration the alternative lifestyle settlers would not be a social feature of rural life.

I am not seeking to quantify the membership grade of individuals within an “alternative lifestyle” but to find them as a social class. The purpose of this discussion is to defend my thesis against the argument that I have failed to define “alternative” in a scientific way.

Such a multiple variable category also enables us to advance from the endless arguments about whether this or that person or group is truly a member of a particular class or movement. It gives us a tool by which we can examine the material aspects of the lifestyle of a particular person or group and gain an appreciation of their degree of inclusion or exclusion, rather than having to rely on ideological differences to determine “in” or “out.”

Because my analysis starts from the social and proceeds to the individual, it appears foreign to those who see social groups as aggregates of individuals, and who are therefore driven to seek a criterion that unambiguously identifies an individual as “alternative” or not. Thus it provides a linkage through which individual-oriented research could be integrated with social-process-oriented research like this thesis.

For my purposes, the details of what weighting should be applied to the characteristics making up the “alternative” category are not too important, because I am not trying to infer the existence of alternative from studying the distinctive features of individuals, but rather examining how larger-scale social processes have produced a set of individuals with distinctive features.

My approach in this thesis has been to show how the different aspects of the class-forming process that shaped the alternative community around Nimbin have produced a population of individual “alternative” persons who each tend to have many “alternative” features. For example, I argue that a Nimbin inhabitant is likely to be both a cannabis user and a migrant from the city, or else a non-user and a non-migrant. I do this by showing how the urban practice of cannabis use was brought to the region by migrants, not by sampling Nimbin residents with a questionnaire asking whether they used cannabis and were migrants.

3.2 Component parts of the class-forming process

As I said in the introduction to this section, the construction of the alternative settler population in the Rainbow Region is a class-forming process. The fact of the migration of a group of people from the cities to the countryside is the primary phenomenon, and all the other processes stem from it.

The class-forming processes of migration involves the exclusion of a part of the alternative lifestyle population from capitalist production in the city, their pre-socialisation for a rural migration, and their migration to the countryside to make a living. You can then look to classical migration mechanisms for moving them into place. The breakdown of the peripheral economic structure, and the construction of the surplus

population in the core areas that could not even form part of the reserve army of labour, are contributory processes.

It seems to me that you can see these selection-for-migration phenomena as being connected with the class-forming process *as a whole*. These phenomena are related, not in the sense that they are attributes that are necessarily shared by all individuals (although it's true that they commonly are) but as aspects of a single, inter-related class-forming process, that has impacted on different individuals in different ways.

There is a precedent for this analysis in Marx's *Capital*, where he explains how the embryonic capitalist and working classes were formed within a previous mode of production and then how they developed within capitalist production. In the case of the embryonic alternative lifestyle class, the alternative lifestyle group that I call the *benefit peasantry* was created within urban mainstream capitalism, and only fully realised after their migration.

If you want to look at the causation of the Nimbin phenomena you can consider the question from two points of view. Take a person who is an alternative lifestyle movement member in the city – in that they have an alternative ideology – would it be their ideology that caused them to move to the countryside? Was the migration of alternatives to Nimbin caused by their ideas about what their lives would be like when they moved there? It seems to me that looking at it from the perspective of those individuals concerned is the wrong way of analysing it.

If you look at it from the perspective of the *social processes* that took place, a totally different explanation comes to the fore. An historical materialist analysis shows that after 1974 the development of the Australian capitalist economy generated a requirement to eject a certain proportion of the population from the working class, even from the reserve army of labour, and make them into non-workers. The creation of a non-working group can therefore be seen as quite independent of the ideology of the people who came to make it up, and instead seen as a requirement of the processes of Australian capitalism. This is *why* the migration to Nimbin actually happened.

Alternative ideology would have had a profound effect on selecting *who* was recruited to this population. The requirement was that someone would have to make a (class and geographic) migration to Nimbin or its equivalent. Clearly it was going to be alternative, greenie types who self-selected for this migration. This shows how a compulsory action can be undertaken voluntarily, and also why it can be hard to see the economic forces that underlie actions like the migration of a cohort of city people. Just because they (personally) wanted to move doesn't mean it wasn't required by capitalism. This can lead to the belief that ideology over-rides economics and to the idea that the alternative movement is somehow beyond class.

In 1987, Metcalf and Vanclay estimated that in Australia around 60,000 persons were involved in the alternative lifestyle movement. Importantly, another 95,000 people intended to develop an alternative lifestyle for themselves.⁷¹ These are significant numbers, comprising at the time 1% of the total Australian population, and the figures point to the growing acceptance of and support for the ideas of the alternative culture. More importantly it shows that having the ideology that moving to the country for an alternative way of life might be a nice thing to do, other material factors (employment for example) impede the migration of many more people than actually make the move to the country.

The migration was an objective social process, and the ideas that people had about moving and the pre-socialisation that they had for migration to the country, simply had the effect of selecting *them* to do it rather than someone else, and in selecting Nimbin as the place they go to rather than some other place. The Aquarius festival – the event that “chose” Nimbin – showed that the necessary infrastructure was already in place for people like them, the climate was beautiful and the land affordable, and there was a pioneering nucleus of alternative residents who worked on the festival or stayed after it.

The alternative culture now represents a diverse range of legitimising ideologies (explanations of why they moved and what they are there to achieve) but nevertheless

⁷¹ Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 2.

people still live an “alternative lifestyle” which can be spoken about as a single phenomenon. In fact people talk about alternative lifestyles as if there are many, and in the next breath they’ll talk about the alternative lifestyle as if there is one. It shows there is a unity within the diversity of lifestyles that is taken for granted by the people concerned, both straight and alternative. The alternatives see themselves as different with regard to each other, but the same with respect to the straight culture.

There is a strong tendency for new migrants from the city to the area to be absorbed into the alternative lifestyle culture, rather than into the straight community. The modified (rusticated) version of urban culture that was determined by the original alternative settlers tends to absorb later urban migrants and it does so invisibly. The alternative lifestyle group represents an outpost of urban culture in a rural milieu. They have the ability to absorb new urban migrants, with the result that you seldom see migrants from the city to the area who do not end up on the alternative side of the alternative-straight divide.

It means that when you look at the primary class process – in this case, the creation of a non-working proletariat by the Australian capitalist formation – migration emerges as the key point, and the other aspects of the process then become secondary. They are ways in which that objective social process becomes expressed in reality. The ideological features that the alternative lifestyle participants have in common, while not insignificant, are not the underlying cause. They’re the proximate (nearby) causes for their particular migration rather than the effective (change causing) reasons.

3.2.1 Migration

Migration is the single most important process that makes up the complex process that constructed the alternative lifestyle population as a distinct class group. Other group-forming attributes are only possible because of the migration of urban dwellers, itself made possible by an earlier migration *from* the country to the city of the original straight farming population.

The alternative lifestyle migration to Nimbin actually reversed the standard core-periphery migration pattern. They replaced traditional farmers forced off the land with urbanites, urban culture, and non-traditional ways of making some kind of an income in the country.

The point cannot be too strongly made that migration is a material, economic feature that is common to almost every rural alternative lifestyle participant (or their parents) yet most researchers do not identify migration itself as being one of the *defining* characteristics of this cultural group.⁷³

3.2.2 Non-traditional way of earning a living in the country

The fact of their urban roots had implications for the way of life the alternative lifestyle migrants made for themselves in Nimbin. They brought with them little or no knowledge of farming practice, and few farm in a traditional manner. This lack of farming experience required those migrants with land to create for themselves a means of getting a living in the country. Subsequently, their land-use patterns are markedly different from the farming practices of the area. If they use their land productively, it will often be in a way that is demonstrably different from “straight” farmers.

The straight farming community manages land with an external market in mind. Alternative lifestyle participants, on the other hand, tend to manage land as internal domestic units, with a high degree of self-sufficiency and sustainability as an ideal for many. The alternative lifestyle participants are, as a group, concerned with environmental issues, and this informs both their political activity and the way they use their land.

For alternative lifestyle persons, “land use” can involve the acquisition of the right to receive a benefit in this rural area, as their ownership of land (and low equity) means

⁷³ Migration and its effect on Nimbin and on the alternative lifestyle community, and the different migratory waves that populated Nimbin will be dealt with in its own section, MIGRATION, page 91.

that they met residency and permanency requirements. It is the low incomes of many of the alternative lifestyle migrants that have predisposed them to different land-ownership patterns as well, and different styles of land management, and different requirements from the land they live on.

3.2.3 Land ownership

For some alternative lifestyle participants the guaranteed income from the state and the cheap lifestyle means they can purchase land because the repayment amounts are often about the same as the rent they would have paid city landlords.

Land ownership by the alternative lifestyle migrants has specific characteristics that distinguish it from “mainstream” land holdings and, importantly, impact upon how they use it. Alternative land ownership differs from straight land ownership in four major ways. First, there is a bigger mix in the kinds of ownership. Rather than one person or family owning a tract of land in sole title, the land is more likely to have some kind of multiple ownership. Second, the amount of rural land owned by each individual is likely to be much smaller. Third, if productive land, it will likely be used more intensively than the straight landowners tend to do. Fourth, it will still be less capitalised than other intensively utilised productive land of a similar nature and, instead, have more labour invested in it.

These factors combine to mean that many within the alternative community find it harder to borrow investment capital, which in turn impacts on how that land is developed. This depresses land prices to some extent, keeping it affordable.

3.2.4 Beneficiaries

The alternative lifestyle economy is marginal to the main economy. Few alternatives are in “straight” full-time, nine-to-five employment. Many subsist on welfare payments, supplemented with occasional seasonal work, and activities peripheral to the mainstream (and sometimes legal) economy, such as barter, labour exchanges, sale of cannabis and various kinds of petty trading. A large amount of this economic activity is invisible to the state.

The fact that benefits rates are the same throughout Australia (although the cost of living varies markedly) links the “characteristic” of benefit dependence to other material features of the alternative lifestyle. Beneficiaries migrate to the area in the expectation of a better standard of living. These benefits include old age and war pensions, disability, sickness and supporting parents’ benefits, as well as unemployment benefits.

Last, but not least, is the fact that beneficiaries are not stigmatised by the alternative ideology, which is another inversion of mainstream ideology.

The number of state-supported people living in the Nimbin region is far higher than the number of individuals who receive (on behalf of their families) a benefit. Persons who are employed by the state in the social services professions can be seen to benefit by the existence of this group of beneficiaries, for without them, they would have no jobs. Likewise, cannabis growers could also be seen as beneficiaries of the state because prohibition raises prices, which provides a covert, unintended government subsidy to the cannabis industry.⁷⁴ This relationship-in-common with the state unites them into a single group, a micro-class.

3.2.5 Recreational use of drugs

Recreational drug use was one of the normative alternative cultural practices. The use of drugs, particularly cannabis, is integral to the hippie or new settlers’ culture – even the conservative Oxford dictionary points to it as an identifying feature of the culture.

Hippie Unconventionally behaving person who is (thought to be) using hallucinogenic drugs and rebelling against organised society.

Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1978, 509.

The recreational use of non-traditional drugs, particularly psychoactive drugs, is one of the boundary markers that separate the alternative lifestyle from the mainstream. Drug use has impacted upon the integration of the alternatives into the rural community and

⁷⁴ These factors will be returned to in *CLASS IN ITSELF: Benefit Peasants*, page 405.

on the economy of Nimbin and the alternative community, and informs some of their political concerns. Willis makes the claim that “these cultures work through profane materials – simple functional commodities, drugs, chemicals and cultural commodities.” He sees the use of drugs as one of the hippie’s “most important constitutive material items,” and shows how drug use can help to create a distinct group.⁷⁵

The essence of the cultural relationship ... is that certain items in the cultural field of a social group come to closely parallel its structure of feeling and characteristic concerns. Having posited itself, shown its existence, manifested an identity in concrete worldly items, the social group has a degree of conscious and unconscious security ... a dialectical engagement with those items and ideas.

Willis, *Profane Culture*, 1978, 4.

Like much of the alternative culture, drug-use was seen as something that alternative (and city) people did, and furthermore, it demonstrated their inversion of many of the priorities of the straight mainstream culture from which they emerged. A recent study by Carol de Launey found that in 1995 many of these differences persisted in Nimbin.

Cannabis users and non-users differed in terms of age, education, employment status, length of time in the region, and use of drugs.

de Launey, *Use of Cannabis and Other Drugs in Nimbin*, Draft Paper, 1997, 10.

The use of cannabis fits into the class-forming process in multi-layered and interacting ways. First, it works as a way of alienating city-dwelling alternatives from authority. Second, as a way connecting them with the area where the cannabis is grown. This comes as a result of inter-personal contacts (a consequence of its illegal status, which affects how cannabis is sold). Third, as a potential way of making a living when they migrate to Nimbin. Fourth, cannabis use (and tolerance of cannabis use) functions as a boundary marker that affirms togetherness with the alternative class group and separateness from the straight population. Fifth, cannabis acts as a link back to the city and work. This reverse migration can occur because links with the city have been maintained because drug use is primarily an urban activity. Sixth, because of the capital

⁷⁵ Willis, *Profane Culture*, 1978, 3.

accumulation that has taken place from the sale of cannabis crops and the purchase of land, the alternative lifestyle has allowed, for some, the acquisition of new work skills and completion of training.

All of those things actually show how cannabis is related to the overall class-forming process in which the urban proletarians migrate to a rural area to become non-working proletarians. These links justify the inclusion of cannabis use or support of cannabis legalisation as one of the defining characteristics of the alternative movement. In one way or another, their cannabis use or support, is connected with aspects of the class-forming process that has generated the Nimbin phenomenon. Opposition to prohibition is a strong social norm among the alternative lifestyle community.

3.2.6 Different class background from host community

Like the counter-culture participants overseas, the first alternative lifestyle migrants were overwhelmingly from white-collar backgrounds, often students or young workers in the “caring” professions.⁷⁰ Many of the early alternative lifestyle participants identify themselves as middle-class, yet they are clustered in the lowest income brackets. This thesis has to account for the anomalous class position of the alternative lifestyle population after their migration to the Nimbin area.

Clearly they are not traditional farmers, yet they (taken as a population) own agricultural land. They have exempted themselves from proletarian working life in the city. They aren't generally in full-time waged work and, for many, surplus value is not appropriated from their labour. They are not subject to the rule of the boss and their labour is not alienated.

What are ... classes? In the simplest terms, they are sections of the people who get their living in the same way.

Burns, *Introduction to Marxism*, 1983, 8.

⁷⁰ “[T]hey tend to be white and come from affluent middle-class families ...” Melville, *Communes in the Counter Culture*, 1972, 20.

I see their semi-subsistence peasant lifestyle (within the dominant capitalist mode of production) and their benefit dependence as combining to form them into a micro-class, the benefit peasantry. As a class the benefit peasantry share a unique relationship to the capitalist mode of production, and their class location is different from the straight population in the Nimbin area, both before and after migration.

3.2.7 Education

Another difference between the straight and alternative populations in the Nimbin area is the level of post-secondary school education. All the data from the research compiled in *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia* agree that the alternative lifestyle group have a higher proportion of people with tertiary degrees and post-graduate qualifications.⁷⁷ What is clear is that the alternative lifestyle population is, overall, very well educated and a large number of them are professionals.

These people are the well educated (post secondary trained) participants who provide what Altman (1977) described as the radical intellectual element in the movement. Such people are creating a form of rural cultural renaissance in the areas in which they settle. Their intellectual backgrounds and cultural tastes result in the revival of local theatre groups, a proliferation of artistic endeavours, the activation of numerous progress associations, and the development, in one instance of a village symphony orchestra. (Metcalf, 1981.)

Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 48.

This high level of education persists. The 1991 Census showed that 34% of the Nimbin population have tertiary qualifications: this compares with a NSW average of 13%.⁷⁸ For

⁷⁷ Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 46-7.

⁷⁸ Carol de Launey gives demographic information on the village of Nimbin from the 1991 Census (de Launey, *Use of Cannabis and Other Drugs in Nimbin*, Draft Paper, 1997, 16) and I have compared it with Australian Bureau of Statistics Web page

those with university qualifications, the figure is 13% which situates the Nimbin population in the cohort of having more than 1 in 10 persons with a university degree.⁷⁹ Other populations with this level of university qualifications include the highest income bracket suburbs of Sydney. However, there is a huge anomaly between these populations in income and employment rates. The similarly educated suburban populations in Sydney earn in excess of \$1,000 a week, while Nimbin residents are among the lowest income earners in the State.

The earlier migrants were sometimes considered to be the intellectual elite in this rural area. This sense of the alternative lifestyle participants being the intelligentsia of an area became another boundary marker between them and the straights.

3.2.8 Different Political Priorities

The boundaries between the straight rural population and the alternative lifestyle migrants were quite clearly demarcated by political issues at the time of their migration to the area. Their concerns show the different material and cultural interests between themselves and the straight rural population.

The alternative migrants are politically active in defending their lifestyle choices and point to their right to be beneficiaries and the advantages it offers to the country. They are aware of the fact of structural unemployment, and see their lifestyle as a means of constructively dealing with it, and offer it as a political solution to the economic and environmental crises of capitalism. Initially, the political involvement of the alternative lifestyle movement was an extension of personal politics and the issues deriving from

(<http://www.statistics.gov.au>) on the 1991 Census for the average income in the NSW State as a whole.

⁷⁹ For those who live in communities, this difference in education is even more pronounced. "Forty per cent have tertiary qualifications: 20 per cent work as professionals, mainly in the health, education and other 'human services' sectors." Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality*, 1995, 39.

their desire to explore new ways of living. They spearheaded the home-birth movement in Australia, became involved in schooling and engaged with the council on local body issues like building codes, rural population densities, and zoning.

A strong environmental concern has been one of the constants of the alternative lifestyle movement over the 25 years of settlement in the area. Changing the drug laws is another major political concern.

An anarchist tradition of not voting is another difference between some of the alternatives and the original straight population. The early alternative lifestyle migrants did not generally vote, fill out census forms or participate in similar activities. Changing voting patterns suggest that this reluctance to vote underwent rapid change, especially in the face of threats to their lifestyle – for instance the mobilisation for Multiple Occupancy.⁸⁰ Such activity can be seen as proof of a corporate or group consciousness, at one and the same an expression of their ideology and their economic position within the capitalist system.

3.2.9 Domestic life

The counter-cultural inversions of mainstream practices and values are also played out within the home. The reasons for this are partly ideological and partly economic. The reversion to a rural domestic mode of production has required the return to many of the gendered practices with regard to the division of labour both within the household and the community at large. This has required the creation (or strengthening) of legitimating ideologies, most often expressed in terms of “men and women are equal but different.”

Family structures are statistically different too, but perhaps not in the way that people had originally hoped. Rather than people living in large loose family groups (family being a chosen rather than acquired category), the lifestyle has proven to attract single parents. This had its roots in the fact that during the early settlement period by the alternative migrants, childless, unemployed, single people could not get the dole, but

⁸⁰ See CLASS FOR ITSELF: Issues of inhabitation, page 431.

sole parents were entitled to state support. So women with children were of net financial benefit to households. Sole parents continue to be attracted to the area for the better quality of life obtainable on a low income.

There is a startlingly high proportion of single parent families in the village itself, with 36.7% of the population, the highest in the Shire.

Tricia Shantz, *Lismore City Council Community Profile*, December 1998.

The alternative lifestyle participants have normalised some personal domestic freedoms, for example, de-facto marriage. Those ideas have “grown up” with the movement, and are mainstream now. Over time too, some of the domestic health practices of the alternatives have become widely practiced by mainstream people: for example home-birth, massage and hypnotherapy, osteopathy and chiropractic therapy. Mainstream dietary practices have changed, and a diet with less caffeine, salt, sugar and animal fat, first introduced by the alternative culture, is now also seen as preferable by the straight community.

3.2.10 Culture

The alternative culture is a consciously constructed culture. Being part of a *counter-culture* implies an inversion of many of the cultural priorities of the mainstream. This gives the alternative culture particular characteristics that set it apart from other minority cultures within the mainstream, and a lexicon and ideology that support these cultural practices.

The self-awareness of being an identifiable entity gives rise to ethnicity as a response.⁸¹ It is this idea of the alternative lifestyle participants constituting an ethnic group that allows us to make sense of their interactions with the mainstream. Using the long

⁸¹ I use the word “ethnicity” in a general way to describe the common sense of identity engendered by shared culture -- language, lifestyle, and customs. Often overlaying these cultural-identity factors there is a shared link to place (more usually a nation), a common class position and a shared racial background.

tradition of ethnographic studies we can meaningfully examine what makes them culturally different, and how these cultural differences can impact on their material interests and outcomes. In this thesis I have located the common economic position of the alternatives, and in doing so I have pointed at their culturally unique way of life and to their shared sense of place (of nationhood) in the countryside around Nimbin.

For the alternative lifestyle participants, reaction and resistance from the mainstream was a validation of their lifestyle and of their moral critique of capitalism. Take the following quote as an example of a reaction to and resistance of the mainstream definition of “freak.” It reverses the point of view from which the boundary between straights and alternatives is seen, rather than accepting the mainstream definition of the alternative lifestyle being marginal.

Freaks and straights: what they are is really a personal thing I suppose. I used to have a friend who'd always go, “We're the straight people, *they're* the freaks!”

Interview with Micky, October 1997

It is worth keeping in mind the cultural advantages that the local rural population have received as a result of the migration of urban dwellers. They have been “rescued” from what Marx (unkindly) called “the idiocy of rural life” and have been subjected to “civilising” urban influences.⁸² I see the arrival of the hippies into rural towns not so much as a rural renaissance, but of urban acculturation.

I got a real affection for the town, it was just a nice place to live and a really good place to hang, and how good it was just to live in a small country town, go and have a decent coffee and wander up to the movies and you know, be able to buy a good newspaper and just all that stuff you associate with, you know, sort-of inner city bohemian ... not quite bohemian, but those little luxuries of living in town, you know, you can actually do it in Nimbin although it's a only one-horse town. And it does have a lot of amazing things for the size of it.

Interview with Cass, December 1988.

⁸² “Civilising” in the sense of civil – pertaining to city, rather than in the more pejorative sense that it is used now.

Things like solar power, conservation and the like reflect ideologies derived from the city that are appropriate to the local area, but are not necessarily the sorts of things that would have evolved from the local class structure as it was before the migration.

A high level of co-operation, made necessary by economics and legitimated by ideology, helps the alternative lifestyle community cope with the aspects of their lives that are the consequence of low incomes.

This section has identified the component parts of a class identification for the alternative lifestyle group. It argues that shared relationship to the mode of production is more significant than agreement over what the “dream” or project of the alternative lifestyle might look like.

The next section, **MIGRATION**, looks at the implications of a politicised ethnicity as the migrant group settles in the Nimbin area, and examines the preconditions that allowed the alternative migration to take place.

SECTION II: MIGRATION

Theoretical introduction to migration

As I said in the previous chapter, alternative lifestyle participants in Nimbin tend to be migrants from city areas, and I believe the urban to rural migration of these people is one of the *defining* characteristics of the alternative lifestyle participants. That is not to say that all migrants who move from the city to the countryside are alternative lifestyle migrants, but the fact of that urban to rural migration is one of a number of inter-dependent ways by which you can distinguish the alternative lifestyle participants from other people who live in the area.

Arguably migrations (either into or out of a community) are the result of economic change, and large-scale migration has, in turn, profound economic consequences. Typically, when people migrate, they are being repelled from their original place of residence through lack of work, a failing infrastructure, changing needs and values. At the same time they are attracted to an area of greater economic power in the expectation that they will fare better if they move. The primary pressure for migration is usually for employment and for a better material standard of living.

Despite this, migration is often looked at as a purely personal choice. The Aquarian migrants give personal and ideological explanations for their migration, and appear to have migrated away from the cities in order not to work, and to create for themselves a non-materialistic lifestyle. These ideological explanations have tended to be accepted by the people studying the alternative cultural group.

This thesis offers a materialist explanation of the alternative lifestyle, and therefore of their migration to Nimbin. I will argue that the pressure to migrate is brought to bear on the working class as a whole, and then migration is undertaken voluntarily by a certain cohort within it.

Migration to Nimbin and the surrounding areas was a reversal of the typical core-periphery migration pattern. Usually people migrate from rural to urban areas. This

pattern, often called “urban drift,” involves people compelled to leave the countryside in search of work. This thesis must account for why the alternative migration was the reverse of the normal kind of population movement for their class and background at the time that it occurred.⁸³

The choice of NSW over Queensland by the alternative lifestyle participants who migrate to the Nimbin area reflects different interests and reasons for migration. The different economic and social interests of these migrants, and the reasons for their migration, have led to different outcomes from the more “mainstream” lifestyle migrations northwards (such as the trend for counter-urbanisation, and rural retirement). These differing interests also help to explain the divisions within the rural alternative lifestyle community itself.

Several levels of resistance have to be considered. The culture and political economy of the rural periphery resists core (city) economic influence and lifestyles. The mainstream “straight” culture resists the alternative “counter-culture.” The alternative culture resists and inverts some mainstream norms and values. Some of the early alternative lifestyle migrants resist other later migrants to the Nimbin area.

Some of the economic forces that have come to bear on these migrants will be identified in Chapter 4, **Migration to Nimbin**. The different waves of migration that have populated Nimbin will be discussed in Chapter 5, **Migratory Flows**. This chapter traces how the alternative ethnicity is engendered and sustained. For now though, we will look at the alternative migration to Nimbin in more general terms.

A model of migration

In order to place what appears to be individual choice into a materialist framework, we need to look at the economic factors that promote or inhibit migration.

⁸³ A later development has been counter-urbanisation, as (mostly richer) people leave the cities for lifestyle reasons.

The core-periphery model of development gives us a simple way of looking at the overall development patterns of the domestic Australian economy. Through this model we can analyse the rural economic decline that led to the de-population of Nimbin in the early 1970s, and its subsequent re-population by the alternative lifestyle community. Using it, we can examine migration as an economic process (rather than a series of individual choices) and how economic and political power imbalances impact upon population movements.

Here I will briefly outline the basic model, with particular emphasis on how it explains migration processes and how its terms relate to the case of Nimbin. A “core” is said to dominate the “peripheral” area.⁸⁴ In Nimbin’s case we are looking at the economic, cultural and political domination of the rural areas of New South Wales by the distant state capital of Sydney. Proof of Nimbin’s peripheral status can be demonstrated by an analysis of transport links. Nimbin is at the far edge of the state of New South Wales and is ruled by the state government capital of Sydney some 800 km away. As I outlined earlier, road and rail linkages between the Nimbin and Brisbane were poor, due to the fact they crossed a state border. So although Brisbane is only about 200 km away it is still easier to get to the Northern Rivers via Sydney than via Brisbane by public transport (including aircraft). The effective isolation brought about by such transport patterns has impacted not only on migration but also upon settlement and work patterns and tourism. For now it only needs to be noted that the Nimbin area was remote from Sydney, and that although Brisbane was much nearer it had little effect on the development of the region because it is in another state.

The core controls the development of the economy of the periphery by developing it, or by failing to develop it, or by developing it in a particular way. This model allows us to link aspects of the worldwide capitalist economic system to the economies of small rural towns in Australia, and consequently to trace the impact of the global economy on the

⁸⁴ Andre Gunder Frank’s 1969 work, *The Development of Underdevelopment*, was the seminal theoretical model in this field.

lives of individuals in those communities. The traditional core-periphery model identifies three developmental phases that impact on migration.

First, the colonisation of the periphery, which then provides raw materials to core urban industry. I talk of *colonialisation* not *colonisation* because I am referring to the establishment of a colonial political and economic regime in the periphery controlled by the core, not just to the settlement by people from the core.)

Second, the near-saturation of core markets and an increasing demand for labour, taken together with the creation of new local and overseas markets for consumer goods.

Third, the re-settlement of industry in peripheral areas (often with government incentives) because of the relative cheapness of labour whose reproduction is subsidised by the local (peripheral) economy; and the expansion of consumer markets in the periphery.

The use of land near Nimbin for bananas, dairy and beef farming, left the economy of the area very vulnerable. Environmental damage made land-based income more marginal as drought and floods took their toll. The farming economy was subject to competition from farmers with more capital, more suitable land and improved farming techniques and technologies, with farms closer to their market. The change in economic focus that amalgamated small dairy factories into large ones also negatively impacted on family farms.

As the original core-periphery theorists have it, the core economy actively “under-develops” the periphery, thus fostering dependency structures that cause distortions in the local economy, and lead to the inability of the rural area to attain autonomous, self-sustained growth.⁸⁵ Distortions in a peripheral economy caused by the investment of the core in the area can be clearly seen when an area becomes dependent on one or two primary sources of income, and then that income is threatened. This dependency can be

⁸⁵ Andre Gunder Frank, *The Development of Underdevelopment*, 1969; and Paul Baran, *The Political Economy of Growth*, 1957.

measured in economic, political and cultural terms. The rural-agricultural sector becomes less able to exert influence on markets, or wield political power. Rural lifestyles and values likewise become marginalised, and subject to political and economic decisions made elsewhere. Consequently we read in our daily papers, reports like the following –

The free market doctrine adopted by successive Australian governments in the past 15 years has left many rural towns feeling abandoned as corporate boardrooms in cities and overseas capitals decide the fate of rural workers and towns.

“Outback revolt threatens political establishment,” *Evening Post*, 14 July 1998, 9.

The basic core-periphery model identifies three stages with regard to migration patterns. Stage one sees rural to urban drift. Stage two involves international migration of workers, and stage three, the repatriation of foreign nationals.

In the case of Nimbin we can easily identify stage one, rural to urban drift, in the history of the area. The model correctly identifies the economic downturn of the agricultural economy, as farming became more of a commercial business than a family farm. This led to the first phase of migration (rural to urban drift) of formerly farming families towards the city centres.

Stages two and three of the traditional core-periphery model concern international and reverse migration. As the economy of the core urban centres constricted, reverse migration to the country did occur as predicted by the model, except that more usually that repatriation would be of foreign workers back to their home countries, not of Australian citizens from the city to begin new lives in the countryside. There is evidence of some inwards international migration of ethnic minorities (most notably from Europe) into the Rainbow Region. They tended to move for fear of nuclear catastrophe, dating their migration to the height of the Cold War. There has also been a small repatriation of Aboriginals back from the city to their indigenous region in the North Coast.

What the model has failed to predict is the reverse migration of Australian citizens from the city to the rural area in such large numbers. The original Aquarian migration – the

first wave of alternative settlers who migrated to the Rainbow Region – fell into a “silence” in the core-periphery model. This silence involves an inversion of the traditional model.

The idea of migration to and repatriation from the core as the core economy constricts requires some re-formulation to be really useful to the analysis of Nimbin. The point of focus (the “side” from which we view the phenomena) for the core-periphery model needs to become the local rural periphery (rather than the core).

In contrast to the repatriation of international migrants to peripheral countries, the alternative lifestyle population were “patriated” to the countryside within Australia. They were expelled from the cities to the peripheral region in and around Nimbin, although they were not originally from there. In already highly urbanised Australia, there were not enough of the urban out-of-work proletariat who had migrated from rural areas. Nor were there sufficient visitor workers to allow for repatriations of the “traditional” population (in this case the children of the farmers) to migrate home.

The Aquarian migrants became de-proletarianised. This is because the core is the place where the work is, not the periphery. By migrating away from the city the alternative lifestyle migrants reduced their access to cash via waged work. Although the core-periphery direction of migration is inverted. The fact that the alternative lifestyle economy includes a significant number of beneficiaries means that they, as a “rural economy,” are linked into dependency with the core (urban) state apparatus, just as securely as if they were dependent upon remittances from more typical migrant family members.

Chapter 4. Migration to Nimbin

4.0 Introduction

Using the core-periphery model to examine migration to Nimbin I answer the question, why did the alternative lifestyle participants migrate to Nimbin and not some other location? The alternative migration to the Nimbin area is situated in a materialist analysis of the economic circumstances of the time. Finally, recruitment is examined as part of the migration process.

4.1 Why Nimbin?

Historical and legal factors predisposed the choice of Nimbin, rather than any other semi-abandoned township with a similarly pleasant climate. Nimbin is near to the border separating New South Wales from Queensland. At the time of first settlement by the alternative lifestyle seekers in the 1970s, Nimbin was as far North as you could go without getting into Queensland where draconian laws were in place with respect to drug use, and where the corrupt and repressive Joh Bjelke-Petersen regime was still in power. For alternative lifestyle participants, higher degrees of political tolerance coupled with the availability of cheap land were prerequisites for their migration to Nimbin. The ten-day Aquarius Festival held in Nimbin in 1973 became a catalyst for the alternative lifestyle participants' migration to area.

The Aquarius Festival – catalyst for migration to Nimbin

The first “Aquarian” migratory wave in the 1970s consisted of people from the Australian urban areas. It was the Aquarius festival that first introduced Nimbin to the Australian alternative movement as a potential place to settle. The festival was organised by the Australian Student Union to celebrate “the dawning of the Age of Aquarius.” It was sponsored by the Federal and State Labor governments and the Australian Arts Council. The theme of the festival was survival into the next century, and appropriately, the village of Nimbin was “re-cycled” to host the festival.

Nimbin is best known as Australia's answer to Woodstock. A village that in the early 70's featured on TV as a ghost town, near dead with the corpses of trees and cut-down rainforest. In 1973 Australia was just getting off the sheep's back, struggling out of conservatism and the horrors of the Vietnam War.

But change had come, and with it a radical new government with the slogan, "It's time." University students, heralding the New Age, had come here to Nimbin and put on the Aquarius Festival and nothing has been the same since. Something new was born here, and for better, and for worse, people have been attracted here ever since, like bees to a honey-pot. [Voice-over.]

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.⁸⁰

In 1972, scouts had been sent all over New South Wales to look for a suitable site in a remote place and they "discovered" the Nimbin valley. They were able to persuade the Nimbin Progress Association to allow them to hold the 10-day festival at Nimbin.⁸¹ A town meeting was called to discuss the students' request to hold an arts festival in Nimbin. Later accounts credit the support of local policeman Bob Marsh with influencing the decision to allow the Aquarius Festival to go ahead. He is reputed to have said in a letter read to the meeting that he believed holding the festival would bring Nimbin to the attention of the Australian public, and "this could be extremely beneficial to the area's future if the town played their cards right."⁸²

Using the existing town facilities and infrastructure as a base, the festival organisers prepared to host the Aquarius Festival in Nimbin. Empty shops were taken over and used as supply stores, cafés were opened, and accommodation made available in suitable vacant town buildings. It was at that time that most of the murals in the township were painted onto shop-fronts. The arts festival organisers didn't have to invent the infrastructure or invest money in it, but simply had to bring it back to life.

⁸⁰ *Nearly Normal Nimbin* is a series of three wonderful documentaries filmed over 20 years by Nimbin film-makers Jeni Kendell and Paul Tait of Gaia Films.

⁸¹ Metcalf, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986, 64, and *Nimbin News*, April-May 1998, 16.

⁸² Bob Hopkins, "How I See Aquarius," *Nimbin News*, April-May 1998, 16.

The fact that it was disused or under-utilised at the time of their arrival meant that it was inexpensive. The old RSL club on the main street was sold for \$500, including furniture and fittings. It was to become the Media Centre and later, the Nimbin Healing Centre, housing Birth and Beyond, the Nimbin Apothecary and the Nimbin Environment Centre.⁸⁹



Pictured above are four of the original Nimbin "pioneers." Left to right they are Benny Zable, Harry Freeman, Paul Joseph and Graeme Dunstan. They were involved in the original Aquarius Festival, and reunited on the 25th anniversary. A huge banner, reading "May the long time sun shine upon you all love surround you and the pure light within you guide your way home," stretched the entire length of the main street. It was another creation of artist-activist Benny Zable and the words were those of an anthem that united the original festival goers.
Photo: Northern Star.

⁸⁹ Dunstan, *Images from the Edge*, 1994, 1. Graeme Dunstan writes that he had to conduct the purchase of this building on the steps of the Lismore RSL because in terms of the RSL dress code he was not considered suitably attired and could not be admitted.

Estimates of the number of people who attended the Aquarius Festival vary from 5,000 to 10,000 people.⁹⁰ Some came and stayed at the site during the ten-day event, others visited the festival for the day. In any case, the Aquarius Festival was wildly successful.

“The aim is for a total cultural experience through the life-style of participation.” ...
“Nimbin was an attempt at do-it-yourself decentralisation.”

Cock, *Alternative Australia*, 1979, 48.

The cutting edges of many, many cultural changes were represented there. There were conservationists talking ecology, healers offering holistic medicine and discovering herbs and acupuncture, architecture students and engineers talking about low energy and low tech, post-Illich educational theorists talking about de-schooling, foodists offering new diets, bakers offering wholemeal bread, Kooris talking land rights, psychotherapists talking about growth and human potential, food co-operatives, videos, alternative media and an array of gurus, guru followers and seekers of spiritual truths.

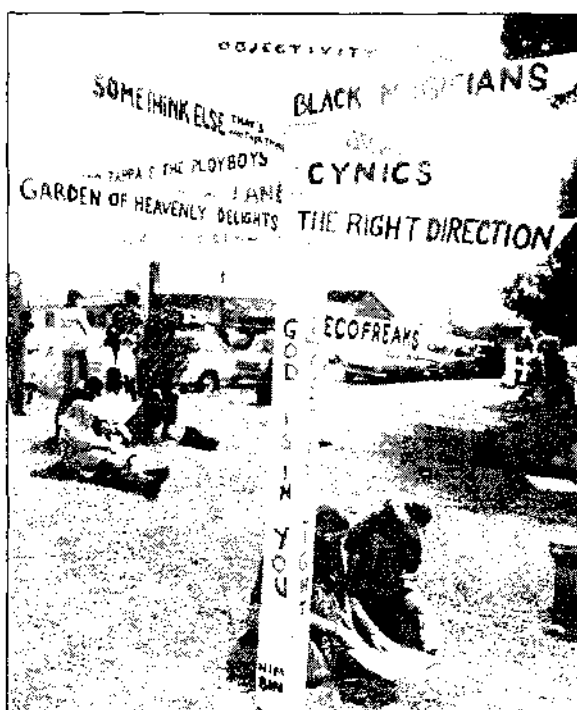
Dunstan, Position Paper, *Images from the Edge*, 1994, 1.

There had been other rock festivals that had preceded the Aquarius Festival in Nimbin, which did not result in a migration of people to those festival sites.⁹¹ So why was the Aquarius Festival in Nimbin different? Why did this festival stimulate a migration and the establishment of an alternative lifestyle community?

The organisers were involved in considerable interaction with the local community. The “negotiations” over accommodation, catering, ablutions, performance space, offices, permission to use commercial premises, interactions with police and local business

⁹⁰ The *Northern Star* of 21 May 1973 reported that around 10,000 people passed through the town over the duration of the festival, (Taylor, 1981, 33) and Metcalf thought that between 5,000–10,000 attended (Metcalf, 1986, Section 4.2, 64). Other estimates give the lower number of 5,000, for example, the *Nimbin Centenary 1882-1982* (1982, 90) and Peter Cock (1979, 49.) The difference may be whether or not day-visitors and non-participant sight-seers are included in the figures.

⁹¹ Cock, *Alternative Australia*, 1979, 23.



Direction signpost at the 1973 festival. The topmost direction – pointing to “objectivity” – rotated in the wind.
 Photo: Chris Meagher from the *Some Children of the Dream* Collection. [Picture sourced from the 1998 Visions of Nimbin fund-raising calendar.]

representatives, and town meetings, connected them with the local community and economy. These activities can be seen as a prelude to a permanent migration by the same group – you could see it as a probationary period, or perhaps see the festival participants as the advance party of a bigger longer-lasting migration. Put simply, their experiences of the festival showed that it would be possible for people like them to migrate to Nimbin and to live there.

The fact that the Aquarius Festival was a more hands-on, do-it-yourself festival rather than the “all services laid on”

festivals that had been a feature of rock festivals in Australia was one of the triggers of migration to the area. Rather than people coming to a pre-organised festival to watch and listen to music and then departing, leaving the clean-up to paid workers, the emphasis was on the festival participants building the festival themselves out of their ideas about lifestyles and using their skills.

While this was happening, a lot of people, there were lots of workshops and things happening, and they were talking about communes and kibbutz’s and things like this, and they looked around and saw that the price of land around here was just dirt cheap, and were able to chip their money in and find they were able to afford large chunks of land. These were usually down the end of valleys, up against the forests, but that was okay because that’s where the best swimming holes were. Quite a good land exchange really. They were quite idealistic in these early years— they had to be, they went onto these properties, there was very little infrastructure, they’d take over a barn or a house if they were very lucky, all working out of that same place together trying to get instantly self-sufficient.

Interview with Bob McKay, November 1996.

Many of the participants and their friends were attracted to the area by the possibility of purchasing and living on the land and a sense of community. Also, Nimbin was in the far-flung reaches of the state of NSW, pretty well as far away from the city and state capital of Sydney as you could get. This, coupled with the relative lack of transport links between Nimbin and the nearer Queensland state capital of Brisbane, meant that Nimbin was relatively remote and undeveloped, so that land costs were within reach of the intending migrants.

There followed a chain-migration, the active recruitment of migrants from among the friends and family of the people who have already migrated. Affective connections to people (friends) already living in the area led to visits, active recruitment and support for new settlers as they moved and settled. This support included important material support – housing, help to obtain an income, and the actual physical transportation of people and possessions to the new “ethnic community.”

Previous contacts with the area also seem to be a relevant factor [in the move to Nimbin] including not only prior knowledge of the country but also proximity of friends ...

Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 35.

The extensive media coverage of the Rainbow Region can be viewed as pre-socialisation (although not necessarily reliable) for intending migrants to the area. The public perception of Nimbin and the surrounding area as the place to be for alternative lifestyle seekers (of all kinds) is one of the factors attracting people to Nimbin, rather than any of the other otherwise “suitable” destinations. The pre-existence of a strong alternative culture is likewise a major pull-factor for many migrants.

What is special about the Nimbin resettlement is that the 1973 Aquarius Festival had offered a multifaceted dream of community futures and that the new settlers came in search of that dream and they came in sufficient numbers and concentration to make that dream a tangible community experience.

Dunstan, *Images From the Edge*, Position Paper, 1994, 3.

In many respects the migration of the alternative settlers to Nimbin and the surrounding area is reminiscent of an ethnic migration. Ethnic migrants often choose to concentrate

in areas where there are symbols of their culture, particularly where they are culturally different from the mainstream (host) community. This is most certainly true of Nimbin. Nimbin's fame as the "Alternative Capital of Australia" now acts as a gravitational force for alternative seekers with no personal connections to the area.

4.2 The economic basis of the alternative migration

To make sense of this migration it is necessary to look at the economic reasons why these people moved to the Nimbin region. This helps make sense of the processes in terms of who migrates, at what point in their lifecycle they arrive, and the length of time they remain.

Every individual choice to migrate is stimulated by a complex of historical, financial, emotional and cultural factors, and that decision takes place within a specific time and place (a moment) in the political economy of the host and original locations. Taking that into account, I still think it is possible to identify major material influences behind these decisions. In most cases, both push and pull motivations are working at the same time, although you can usually see which impulse is dominant within the push-pull dialectic at any given time, and locate the material impetus which underlies that migration, even if it is hidden under ideological explanations.

Alternative lifestyle migrants differ from other migrants in terms of economic motivation. In part, the low income of many of the first wave of migrants is due to the fact that they moved away from traditional wage labour. They sometimes migrate in order *not* to work or to work in a different way, rather than migrate in order to work. In either case, though, migration takes place in anticipation of a better lifestyle.

There is a disproportionately low level of income and high dependence on social security benefits ... The Nimbin district has the highest unemployment rate (34.4%) and the lowest income levels of any area in the Lismore Local Government Area.

Tricia Shantz, Lismore City Council Community Profile, December 1998.

For the less well-off migrants, analysis is easier. The key is that, for beneficiaries, a move to Nimbin enhances living standards. City life on a low income is a great deal

harder than surviving on the same income in the country. The freedoms enjoyed by the alternative lifestyle migrants are simply unaffordable if they had remained in the urban areas they came from.

When we first came here there were a hellavuh lot of houses for rent, and the going rent was two dollars a week, so it was really like, you know, you could live in paradise on a pauper's income.

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

The idea that some people migrate because they are pushed from the city is very helpful in directing researcher attention to the material forces that prompt migration for the less well off. But what about those migrants with more resources who appear to voluntarily choose this lifestyle, turning their backs on (potentially) a comfortable middle-class lifestyle? What are the material benefits (if any) that this group of migrants hoped to acquire by migrating?

In order to answer this question it is necessary to understand these push and pull impulses within a broader dialectical Marxist explanation. Specifically, what does, "I can be free here," mean in a material sense?

Despite the assumption of free choice, I believe you can identify push factors in the material explanation of the urban environment of even the well-off alternative lifestyle migrants, and pull factors in the materialist account of the alternative lifestyle as it is lived. The alternative way of life constitutes a freedom from the nine-to-five city rat-race and the alternative lifestyle participants enjoy a level of autonomy unobtainable in the city. These are material benefits acquired by the alternative lifestyle migrants. Some of these factors are listed by Kali McLaughlin in the following quote.

I was terrified of being shut into a nuclear family on an economic treadmill in an urban environment, which I hated. It was the personal thing that drove me here. I wanted family without that constraining ... being owned sexually by a partner that I had to be faithful to, and being owned financially by a boss that one had to kow-tow to. They were the two things that horrified me, as well as doing [jobs] I didn't really believe in. So, I came here. [Kali McLaughlin.]

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

The benefits of the rural alternative lifestyle are many. Working productively for things they believe in, building their own homes, the wonderful climate and environment, the sense of community and shared purpose, and a low but secure income for beneficiaries, gives participants the enormous sense of choice and freedom to do what they want, when and how they want to do it. For small-business owners, there is a sense of self-determination, even if they could work fewer hours for more pay in the city.

Class theory includes analysis of workplace autonomy. In terms of class background, the first (pioneer) alternative settlers to the Rainbow Region had a strong tendency to come from white, educated, white-collar families. The employment trajectory for those migrants, had they remained in the city, would have been into white-collar jobs and a materially comfortable life, but with little real autonomy in the sense that they (like blue-collar workers) would have had a boss telling them what to do and when to do it.

Traditionally, leisure has been the preserve of the very rich.⁹² The alternative lifestyle, by paring down expectations and demands to basic necessities, affords the alternative lifestyle participants unparalleled amounts of leisure time and levels of self-determination for people of their class and income.⁹³ Certainly, the leisure (the freedom to do what you want) afforded to these “ideological” migrants is considerable, and it could not be purchased by them in the cities on their incomes: freedom and autonomy have a high economic value. The fact that the alternative lifestyle participants found that freedom in the Rainbow Region can be explained in part by looking at the patterns of development of the Nimbin area, and its social, economic and political distance from Sydney.

⁹² Wish You were Here: Australian Tourism Studies, 1999, 2.

⁹³ “Freedom” is a catch-word for this generation. An analyst, Sandi Berghan, has identified that the notion of freedom is one of the things that typify the “1960s generation.” (Reported on the TV3 News, 25 June 1998.)

4.3 Recruitment

Recruitment to the area happens through media exposure, through tourism, and by word of mouth. As a group alternative migrants to Nimbin are highly literate and many subscribe to alternative lifestyle publications.⁹⁴ All of these factors help intending migrants build up a picture of what life in the Rainbow Region will be like and act to pre-socialise people before migration. Migration to the area happens mainly through active word-of-mouth recruitment among the friends of alternative lifestyle participants, and emotional ties within the group are a big factor.

The alternative lifestyle participants share a distinct cultural pattern, evidence of pre-adaptation to rural life. Prior to migrating from urban areas they acquired much of the ideology that fitted them to a rural existence. Ameliorating the sense of urban to rural “culture shock” the urban alternative lifestyle population develop some of the necessary ideology for a rural alternative lifestyle before they move. However, it seems even the most well prepared people have to adjust their ideas about the place, and that such “pre-socialisation” is not necessarily reliable.

Significantly, too, the alternative lifestyle participants have altered their rural environment to incorporate many urban features in the form of cafés, live theatre, films, music, dance and art, not to mention an urban perspective on life.

Migration and tourism processes are closely linked, and both can be seen as integrating forces. Tourism is a major source of new migrants, and the constant flow of people between the core and the periphery maintains links and keeps people aware of opportunities in both places and maintains interpersonal links. Visiting as a tourist is another way of getting an idea of how to live and behave – and acts as a form of pre-socialisation for intending migrants.

⁹⁴ See Mercalf, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986, Section 2.4, 30. Mercalf uses content analysis of alternative lifestyle publications to gauge the level of interest in the Australian alternative lifestyle movement.

Another form of migration that is not well covered by existing literature on alternative lifestyle participants is the migration into and out of classes. In a later chapter I will make the argument that the alternative lifestyle migrants have not only migrated geographically but they have made a class migration too.⁹⁵ This migration has been from their original class position as workers, to a class position as “non-workers” who live on the land and are supported (at least in part) by the state. This class position, of benefit peasantry, is not a permanent state, but is the class position that these alternative lifestyle migrants inhabit while they are there.

⁹⁵ See CLASS IN ITSELF: Benefit Peasants, page 405.

Chapter 5. Migratory Flows

5.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the migratory flows that have populated Nimbin, and argues that despite their differences the alternative lifestyle population are united into a single cultural group by the fact of their migration. The chapter is in several parts. First I look at the variations between the migratory waves. Then I examine the changing degree of acceptance and resistance and the circumstances of these interactions. This gives clues to the ethnic differences persisting between the traditional (straight) rural population and the alternative lifestyle participants. Then I discuss how the alternative migration came about and why people have continued to migrate to Nimbin.

When talking about the population structure of Nimbin, locals usually discuss it in terms of waves of migration or “invasions.” A migratory wave should be thought of as the main migration of a particular migrant group. While usually referring to the post-Festival migrations, I think the idea of migratory waves can also be applied to the people that preceded the alternative migrations as well.

The first “wave” of white settler migrants into the Nimbin area included the people (of mainly English and Irish extraction) who came into the area to exploit the timber resource. They were followed by the pioneer settler farmers at the turn of the century.

In the 1920s the next wave of migrants to arrive in Nimbin were the banana croppers, many of whom were Italian. Later, when the market for bananas collapsed and the dairy market become too competitive, many farmers turned to beef farming. The Italian banana croppers started small businesses in the town or moved to the cities for work.⁹⁶ External economic and political factors, diminishing soil fertility and climate change created the conditions for the rural downturn.

⁹⁶ Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 30; *Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982*, 1982, 33.

[U]nder the stress of a shrinking economy ... neighbours picked over the possessions of bankrupted neighbours in search for bargains in the liquidation sales of farms which had been a lifetimes effort ...

Dunstan, *Images From the Edge*, Position Paper, 1994, 4.

The depressed prices of agricultural produce led to the depopulation of the area by farming families and others dependent upon their business. Rural decline was exacerbated by the rationalisation of services – for instance, the centralisation of dairy factories, banks, hospitals, supermarkets, schools and so on. A smaller population and the loss of custom to larger centres meant the local employers were unable to absorb the available workforce.⁹⁷ Such rationalisations were made possible by the improvements in transport, industry, and communication technologies. Improved agricultural technology meant that fewer farm workers were needed. The lessened requirement for farm labour led to fewer job opportunities for local school-leavers, many of whom were forced to migrate to the cities in hope of work.

By the late nineteen sixties Nimbin was more or less a ghost village. Three-quarters of it was boarded up, the school was about to close, and people could not sell their properties—many simply walked off the land. The area was depopulating on a massive scale, and the local economy was in ruin.

Interview with Bob McKay, July 1996

The out-migration of farming families from towns like Nimbin as a result of the rural economic crisis resulted in low land prices, unoccupied houses and disused commercial and community premises. This created the economic or material conditions for the migration of a certain stratum of city dwellers into the countryside.

⁹⁷ Burnley, *Atlas of the Australian People 1991 Census New South Wales*, 1996, 19; “Outback revolt threatens political establishment,” *Evening Post*, 14 July 1998, 9.

5.1 Variations within the alternative lifestyle population

It is a mistake to see all the alternative lifestyle migrants as all being alike. The earliest alternative lifestyle migrants clearly distinguish between themselves and some of the people who have followed in their footsteps.

Nimbin is a melting pot, it's a much more diverse place than ... [the image of the hippie drop-out]. That was an invasion in '73, but there have been a whole series of middle-class invasions and professional working families in nice four-wheel drives with money to buy land. There's been the MO invasions ... there's been a whole Newcastle invasion that happened in the late 70's and early 80's and brought friends and brothers and lovers and sisters up here as well. And then a very large invasion of French people and German people. I don't know when the Japanese and the Koreans and the Libyans are coming, but Nimbin is a very complex place and this one-dimensional idea of the hippie drop-out doesn't suit in any way the broad sweep of people here. [Graeme Dunstan.]

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

The above account suggests that the original straight population has accepted some of the alternative lifestyle migrants, and that people distinguish between the clusters of migrants. For the straight population the more acceptable group was part of the first alternative migration who went to Nimbin to “live their dream,” and who have resided there for a quarter of a century.

The alternatives, there's two classes—there's certainly a class that established themselves very well in the area and I don't think they have many enemies at all, really, amongst the straights, as we are commonly known. Straight and alternate. [Interview with self-identified straight male.]

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

The less acceptable group tends to be portrayed as part of another migration, and are popularly believed to have included more identifiable drug users or beneficiaries who didn't attempt to establish a new lifestyle on the land. However there have *always* been a wide variety of alternative migrants with different objectives for their migration.

While many of the original alternative lifestyle migrants comment that the wave of unemployed migrants who arrived later “don't share the dream,” I think this is more a

result of selective memory than reality, because there have always been people who have caused disruptions or have been parasitical. Talking about the days preparing for the festival in 1973, the writers of the *Nimbin Centenary* noted,

But this news and excitement brought the problem that, on and off, Nimbin has had ever since – hangers-on. They arrived on the Anzac Day weekend. Suddenly there was a new group.

Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982, 1982, 90.

There are undeniable variations and divisions within the alternative lifestyle group – but that is the same with any social or ethnic group. Some of the “newer” new settlers are professional escapees and people seeking rural retirement on ten-acre blocks, and others are beneficiaries escaping urban poverty. I argue we need to understand these ideological differences in terms of the class-forming processes of migration, and the differences within the migrant group as tied to their migratory wave.

As time has passed, many of the original alternative lifestyle migrants find themselves in the position of resisting the later migrants, and sometimes in conflict with their lifestyles and ideas. The arrival of these later migrants sometimes re-kindles old hostilities and re-activates the ethnic boundaries between straight and alternative. Some of the original settlers then attempt to distance themselves from the newer migrants. However, this is not a universal tendency, because the alternative culture can absorb all incoming migrants and depends, in fact, on urban migrants for a constant source of reinforcement from city lifestyles.

These more recent “new settlers” help to complete the process of integration that the Nimbin community has undergone in the past decade.

Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982, 1982, 141.

I think that part of the “exclusive” definition of who comprise the alternative lifestyle can be linked with the growing acceptance of the first alternative settlers within their new rural community. Some of the original Aquarian new settlers don’t welcome the newer waves of migrants who are seen as different in many ways from them, who have

migrated for different reasons and don't share the same "dream" of what an alternative society could be like.

[F]reedom ... is one of the quintessential attractions of life in Nimbin for many of the people who migrate there. ... It gives rise to a large number of itinerants, refugees from the alienation of city life, usually very young, who come to Nimbin believing that this is where they can "let it all hang out". ... It is the Nimbin myth that has attracted these people to the town.

Nimbin Centenary 1882-1982, 1982, 126

Some later migrants came to escape from the impoverished life-style they had endured in the cities. They were expelled, or pushed from the cities into the rural hinterland on account of the difficulties of having a decent life on a benefit in the city. People who feel they've had to make the decision to migrate in order to survive on a benefit could be expected to have less commitment to the alternative movement overall, and are more likely to return to "normal" city life if conditions for them improve.

In some ways the original Aquarian migration could be seen as social pioneers who have legitimised this way of life. Their "escape" during the 1970s struck a chord among their age and class cohorts who stayed in the system for longer and who are now older and wealthier. When the later group finally "escaped" these factors played a part in the way they could "rusticate." Being at a different stage in their lifecycle, they had different expectations from life.

More recently, another, wealthier cohort has migrated. This can be seen as a delayed "Aquarian" migration. A recent study reported in the *Northern Star* has shown that the popular preconception of single unemployed youths migrating to the area (and contributing to double the unemployment rate in this region of NSW) is not based on fact.⁹⁸ Instead the study suggests that the cohort that is migrating to the area matches the age and class profile of the main Aquarian migration in the 1970s, only at a later stage in their lives.

⁹⁸ "Dole-bludger 'myth' exploded," *Northern Star*, 6 June, 1998, 5.

One of the features of the alternative lifestyle migrations over the 25-year history of settlement in the Rainbow Region is how many move, and how few stay for any significant period of time. Over time, this original population has been “purified” by selection. Many of those people who didn’t make “a go” of the alternative lifestyle have left the area, leaving a select group from the original Aquarian migration.

Overall, I think that the differences between the waves of migration into the Rainbow Region are not as great as they might seem, and what they have in common is more important than what divides them. In many ways the differences can be described in terms of lifecycle changes, population “selection,” and a difference in explanation brought about by the changing environment in which these migrants act.

So what I am saying is that the explanation for what they are doing and why they are doing it has changed, and I think that this explanation has its roots in the economic environment in which these migrants enact their decisions. This explanation can make them appear to be migrating for different reasons, whereas the material reasons underlying their decision to migrate may be, in fact, very similar (and just as economic) to those informing the original Aquarian migration, and this is reflected in the basic similarities in their material lifestyle when they get to the Nimbin area.

I think some of the newer migrants represent their reasons for moving in more economic terms, rather than the vague idealist terms that the Aquarian settlers used – ideas that now sometimes appear risible. This makes the newer group of migrants seem more materialistic, less concerned with the “dream.” For example, in an interview with a participant at the original Aquarius Festival in 1973, an enthused young man said of the Festival: –

It’s really peaceful and the kids are really putting their hearts into it. Like, they’re really co-operating. And everybody smiles at you walking down the road. And that’s just so different from Sydney which is alienated, you know, they’re hiding behind their glasses, their sunglasses and that, you know. The kids just have been yearning for this for so long, and this is our ship coming in.

Interviewer: What’s going to happen afterwards do you think?

It’s going to be a continuum now, its just going to spread and the kids are going to grow, because the little kids are going to grow up and see the colourful children and

the ones who are wise are the ones to follow, and there'll just be ... it'll be snowballing.

Interviewer: And what are you going to be doing?

I'm going to go wandering in the jungle and planting fruit and then I'm going to go into [Canberra] and see if the government will subsidise me to plant fruit trees on the side of the road.

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

Over the years of alternative settlement the economic situation has worsened, and these later migrants have had to grapple with the economy in ways that many of the original settlers did not. The availability of jobs, which represents the ability to rejoin the “mainstream” if things don’t work out, is one such example. You would want to be quite sure of your decision to give up a good job and migrate to Nimbin in a difficult economic climate, whereas in the early 1970s there were plenty of jobs and leaving work was not such a financial risk or sacrifice.

5.1.1 Beneficiaries

It is widely acknowledged that many migrants to the Nimbin area are people who migrate in order to survive more comfortably on some kind of a benefit. Such benefits include sickness, disability and old-age pensions, unemployment benefit and supporting parent benefits. These migrants are an identifiable group, and their critics take the total figure of “beneficiaries” and complain they are “all dole bludgers.”

The 1991 census showed there were higher than average rates of in-migration in the statistical area that includes Nimbin, almost certainly reflecting migration there for cheaper living.⁹⁹ Rather than showing an increase in the number of people “who weren’t willing to earn their living,” the increasing number of beneficiaries was the result of economic recession. The 1991 census results showed that the proportion of one-parent families increased in most of the regional centres, most notably in Lismore, with nearly

⁹⁹ Burnley, *Atlas of the Australian People 1991 Census New South Wales*, 1996, 33.

16% of families comprising sole parent households.¹⁰⁰ Data from the 1996 Census shows that in Nimbin itself the number of single-parent families was even higher, showing 36.7% of the population. It is important to remember that not all single-parent families receive benefits.

The alternative lifestyle culture makes a virtue of low material needs. The cultural repertoire of the alternative lifestyle “represents the ability to secure the conditions for survival” by rejecting materialist accumulation in favour of quality of life.¹⁰¹ In other words, the alternative culture gives people the resources, the information and framework they need to permit them to live on a low income.

Blue-collar migrants

Relatively few skilled blue-collar workers and trades-people migrated with the original Aquarian migration. Research suggests that skilled tradespersons (mechanics, plumbers, electricians) were in short supply in the rural areas.¹⁰² They tended to stay put, especially if they had work in the city.

When the unemployment crisis began to hit Australian workers, unemployed, semi-skilled and unskilled (blue-collar) workers were not the first to leave the cities, although they are always the group that is first and hardest hit by any economic recession, and could be seen to benefit most by migration.

The late migration of this group of workers is due to the fact that blue-collar workers at the time of the original Aquarian migration were not socialised into believing that moving to the country was a viable option. The work ethic of working class people tends to be deeply ingrained and to be without employment is sometimes considered a

¹⁰⁰ Burnley, *Atlas of the Australian People - 1991 Census New South Wales*, 1996, 30.

¹⁰¹ Willis, *Profane Culture*, 1978, 176.

¹⁰² Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 47.

calamity.¹⁰³ By moving to Nimbin they have moved away from any (however slim) chance of full-time work although many get some short-term or part-time work.¹⁰⁴ Their migration indicates an ideological shift from the notion that there is a job for everyone to the acceptance of unemployment. They tend to migrate (often via Nimbin) to areas away from the coast – over the Dividing Range and into the areas out West, like Drake and Tabulam, because the land there is more affordable.

I suggest that cannabis use is one of the key cultural links between the Aquarian migration and these later migrants. Cannabis use is common among blue-collar workers, and through the processes of buying and selling, they became linked to the area where cannabis is produced.

Drug migrations

Some people imply that drugs arrived in town as a later “migration,” somehow distorting or contaminating the original aim of the alternative lifestyle in Nimbin. In fact drug use was part of the cultural repertoire of the Nimbin alternative lifestyle community at its inception as an alternative town.

[P]eople came and then their friends came, or people heard about it, the story got out. I remember hearing about Nimbin off people in about '77. Seth came back and he was telling me and [my brother] all about it, what a great town it was. You could take mushrooms, trip out, lie down in the middle of the street and the cars would drive around you ... (I think he's talking from experience here) ... and people would come up and sort of move you out of the way without it being any sort of a problem. You know, very much friendly towards freaks and trippers and that. I remember thinking even then that that sounded pretty good.

Interview with Alex, October 1997.

¹⁰³ Willis, *Profane Culture*, 1978, 45.

¹⁰⁴ I am arguing against the idea that they were unemployable, not against the idea that there was no employment available for them.

In the 1980s a significant number of migrants to Nimbin went there to get *away* from the drug culture in the city – away from dealers, creditors, drug-taking friends and from the easy availability of drugs (particularly narcotics) – by moving to an area where the opportunities (the networks) for getting those drugs were few. It's known as "taking the geographical cure."

Especially in the junkie scene there is a high turnover of people coming and going. Just dope itself, or dope scenes generally have a high turnover of people—get busted, try and clean up, fuck off, do a geographical to somewhere else, even if it's not to get away from drugs but just their debts and their shit life or whatever, so you know.¹⁰⁵

Interview with Cass, December 1996.

Migration to Nimbin was once such a cure. The original alternative migrants were generally not into narcotics, but in contrast to other rural towns of the same size, the inhabitants were pretty relaxed about people's pasts and their use of recreational drugs.¹⁰⁶ Like the other alternative lifestyle migrants, these "geographical cure" migrants moved to Nimbin hoping for (and mostly finding) a better way of life. People who had successfully migrated to Nimbin often recruited their friends, especially those who were in trouble in the city.

Was the intention to get you off smack? Were they doing the geographical cure? Did they come down to get you?

I think so. Yeah. Yes, I think so. I think it was more, "Go down there and buy smack, and if you find Iona, bring her back." And it was so nice to see a friendly face too, because they'd all been gone for various amounts of time, and I'd been going down the tubes, so it was so nice to see somebody who liked you anyway, you know. And in fact it was a relief to be away from Sydney.

Interview with Iona, July 1995.

¹⁰⁵ In this context "dope" means heroin not cannabis.

¹⁰⁶ This acceptance ties into the cultural attribute of "tolerance."

Nimbin as a place to take a geographical cure worked quite well for a time. Over time, however, as people became established, their homes built and gardens productive, and as they came to have more cash (from the sale of their cannabis crop) and more leisure time, some of these ex-addicts were at a bit of a loose end. As someone said, they'd achieved their dream, now what? They felt they had run out of things to do, other than to "inhabit" their land. It was these people who were most likely to again become heroin users.

The people with lots of money [from growing cannabis]- they'd bought their land, or their community, they'd built the beautiful bush house, they'd watched the garden grow, they'd maybe done that for a few years, maybe they were interested in craft, maybe they'd had a kid or two, whatever ... they were rich and bored ... yeah, so smack fucked up a lot of people in Nimbin really badly.

Interview with Cass, December 1998.

By periodically visiting friends in the city and bringing heroin back with them, for themselves and their friends in and around Nimbin, these people became their own dealers. These trips became more organised and regular, the amounts of heroin brought into the area became larger, and the number of users burgeoned, and the frequency of their use meant they had addictive habits, rather than their usage being more casual-recreational as it had been.

The smack scene in Nimbin grew from being just a little scene ... [it] went from being old users from the city who every now and again would get on together, to be more and more new people who'd never used before and younger people, and then even more it grew and people starting coming to Nimbin for the smack, you know, Nimbin was the place to score.

Interview with Alex, October 1997.

The availability of large amounts of cash from cannabis sales and the number of people with addictions and the high number of casual users made it possible for the big-time, profiteering heroin dealers to move in. Prior to that, heroin dealing in the town had been done by local users who bought a little extra and sold it to cover their own expenses. The use of heroin was tolerated by most of the Nimbin alternative lifestyle participants,

and this is related to the routine use of other illegal drugs by the group as a whole, and the anarchistic culture that is against state interference in their lives.

The geographical cure has collapsed because they have been joined up to a new urban supply. The people who left the drug scene in Sydney are confronted with drugs arriving in the local distribution network via the nearby Gold Coast. The development of the heroin trade in Nimbin has resulted in a significant number of people migrating *out*, taking another geographical cure, and moving away to another even more remote location or to a city where the heroin culture and networks are unknown to them, at least for a while.

Methadone clinic

There is considerable debate about the role of drugs in Nimbin. Some people claim that drug users and dealers have been tolerated (or at least not resisted) by Nimbin, others blame the media for popularising Nimbin as the place to score, and others blame the Department of Health for installing a needle exchange and methadone clinic. Many people in Nimbin see the establishment of a methadone clinic in Nimbin as leading to an influx of intravenous drug user migrants.

We've got two hundred people on the methadone clinic—they've got to have two hundred to keep going—less than two hundred and they've got to close. We've got a population of ten thousand people within ten kilometres.

Interview with Bob McKay, July 1995

Using the population catchment area estimate suggested by Bob McKay of 10,000 persons in a ten kilometre radius, this represents a resident methadone-using population of around 2% of the total population (which doesn't count all the people who use narcotics and *aren't* on the methadone programme) and has had a major impact on the

town's social structure.¹⁰⁷ Using the catchment area population estimate (given in the 1996 census) of 1766, the figures are much more striking.

Given the small size of the town (with 319 persons in residence on census night in 1996) locating the methadone clinic in the nearby city of Lismore would have seemed more rational – in that a sizeable addict population implies a significant social burden on a community. Many critics see this decision as another example of the cynical lack of concern for Nimbin as a community and cashing in on its reputation as a tolerant place. These are political as well as social issues.

Having the methadone clinic in Nimbin works in the way that jails function as “incubators” for crime. This is because of the low level of long-term rehabilitation, and the fact that it puts you in contact with a wider group of fellow users.¹⁰⁸ The clinic treats a vulnerable clientele and there are always persons willing to supply heroin to anyone who drops out of the programme. They only have to walk out the door and onto the street.

Many heroin users are in receipt of a sickness benefit or invalid's pension. There is considerable advantage to getting an invalid's pension as opposed to a sickness benefit, because you are work-tested less frequently by the Commonwealth doctors. However, being officially recorded as an “addict” has its perils as well. As a community, drug-users have a variety of strategies for dealing with the bureaucracy, and for getting their

¹⁰⁷ Given that in the 1991 census there were only 211 persons aged 14 and over who lived in the town proper, 200 methadone users represents a staggeringly high number in the hills around Nimbin. It also shows that the Nimbin statistical boundary can be less than relevant in terms of using the data gathered from the census, because there just aren't that many addicts. Many people registered in Nimbin are from out of town and go to Nimbin for treatment on account of the generally lower levels of hostility they encounter there.

¹⁰⁸ Partly this is due to the unpopularity of methadone as a treatment for heroin addiction, being many times more addictive and having serious side effects. The only real benefits of methadone over heroin are that it is free and legal.

money at the least cost to their dignity and their privacy. People who are HIV positive or have AIDS also sometimes strategise to preserve their privacy and dignity by registering at medical centres under assumed names, or in different towns or suburbs from the one they live in. These anti-bureaucratic activities are material practices that underlie important super-structural features of the alternative cultural formation.

Persons with HIV and AIDS

Another form of the geographical cure is the migration of persons who are HIV+ to the area. This group of people have moved to the Northern Rivers because of the beautiful and healthy environment. Statistics show that as a “cohort” the people with HIV and AIDS in the Northern Rivers are among the longest-lived.¹⁰⁹ In a personal communication with Carol de Launey, Di Furniss (the Manager of the Northern Rivers AIDS Council) said that: –

The Northern Rivers region has the largest [HIV and AIDS] positive population outside metropolitan areas in NSW ... For Positives the region offers: (a) access to complementary therapists and (b) a less stressful lifestyle.

de Launey, *HIV and Longevity: Cannabis and Lifestyle*, 1997.

The prior existence of several gay and gay-friendly communes and communities, in conjunction with the generally tolerant local population makes Nimbin a comfortable place to be for many gay people (regardless of their HIV status).

Survey results from Mardi Grass show that only 96.9% of persons agreed to the either/or male-female categories.¹¹⁰ I would put this down to Mardi Grass being an event that attracts a large number of gender-flexible people and again points to some people's

¹⁰⁹ de Launey, *HIV and longevity: cannabis and lifestyle*, 1997.

¹¹⁰ Derrett, Prosser & Dimmock, *Lismore City Council Festival and Event Strategy*, School of Tourism & Hospitality Management, Southern Cross University, Lismore, 1998. Cited in Strong, Leah, Kate Ledger & Brad Aird, Unpublished Event Management Unit, 1998, Section 4.1.

reluctance to being “put in boxes.” Given that there are several gay intentional communities in the zone, and Nimbin is a gay-friendly community, it is not a big jump to conclude that the area would also be more comfortable to persons of indeterminate gender, a point that has been noted by several people on the internet. Cross-dressers in costume would never agree to being described as the wrong gender for their character for a survey. Remember too that gender is a *role* rather than simply a category.

Loonies, droogs, ferals and other eccentrics

Nimbin is also a viable destination for “loonies” and “crazies” who have drifted into the village seeking some form of organic (as opposed to institutionally organised) “community care.” Nimbin has a reputation of being tolerant to “freaks” of all kinds, and accepting of people who do not quite fit into ordinary society or feel alienated from it.

There are many people who would not lead such useful lives if they had not migrated to Nimbin, and harmless eccentrics simply add colour to the place, or have a useful role as devil’s advocates. Many of these “local loonies” have lived in and around the village for many years, quite a few of them on one of the intentional communities where there are usually enough people to absorb and dilute their madness and help out if needed.

Nimbin is one of the few places where there is relatively low stigma attached to mental illness. Also, as beautifully described by Michael Balderstone, many Nimbinites feel that they are different from the mainstream and that is why they’re here in the first place.

I think Nimbin is full of rebels. Nimbin’s full of black sheep. I think that’s very true. I felt a black sheep always, wandering around, and I know hundreds of people did who ended up here. And we came here and suddenly there was a mob of black sheep and you felt at home and you felt a bit understood, and you weren’t crazy and there were other people thinking like you think and that’s very reassuring for people. [Michael Balderstone.]

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

Many people in Nimbin have told me that in the past they witnessed vehicles pulling up and disgorging persons newly released from institutions. There is some bitterness from

the local population that outside organisations felt free to “dump” people in the town and let the locals cope at their own time and expense.

The other thing is the psychiatric impact. People are not given bus tickets to Nimbin when they're let out of the madhouse like they used to. ... [W]e were a dumping ground for people who couldn't be on the outside anywhere else ... That was always a problem in the early days. ... We certainly tolerate more 'aberrant' behaviour than they do in cities these days.

“Kali on Alternative Energy,” *Nimbin News*, August–September 1998, 7.

From the point of view of the people involved, Nimbin has got to be the best choice of location if you are looking for community support and tolerance – because no matter how frustrated the citizens are with the institutions and with street people, they are *still* more likely to help than people on the street in other towns and cities. For my part, I think this phenomenon could just as likely to be at the behest of the person being “delivered” to Nimbin. Certainly, if I were newly released from some kind of institution, Nimbin would look like a very desirable destination.

Like the decision to set up a methadone clinic in Nimbin, some people also think that it demonstrates a lack of concern for the welfare of the township and community. They believe that the organisations or persons involved in these decisions don't have any concern for either the person abandoned in the town, or for the effect that a large number of “dispossessed” persons will have on Nimbin.

[A] number of itinerants, refugees from the alienation of city life, usually very young, ... come to Nimbin believing this is where they can “let it all hang out.” ... Many nights there will be half a dozen such visitors sleeping rough under buildings in Nimbin town, or in the park.

Some have been so impaired by early family and school experiences that they are quite unable to cope with reality in any sort of useful way. A significant number of these people have spent time in psychiatric institutions and come to Nimbin instead of going back into hospital. They stretch the tolerance and compassion of the townspeople and new settlers alike; serving to remind us of the fragility of our compassion.

Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982, 1982, 126.

Some of these people can be quite difficult to deal with – unhappy, confused and angry – and have managed to integrate less well. These are people who haven't managed to establish the support needed to cope in some way, and are sometimes known as the droogs, street people, and ferals. In some sense, as the following quote suggests, this group falls short of the acceptable alternative image. As Niko Besnier pointed out in a public lecture, even groups that are marginal to mainstream society have marginal members.¹¹¹

The droogs moved in [to the Tumble Falls community] and they were the first people to get their shares taken off them, and be thrown off. They were the first indication ... it was like, everyone agreed because they were so full-on, and nasty and did weird things ... I mean they were a bunch of arseholes, I wouldn't want them as my neighbours, but they're a sort of necessary evil, a good bunch to have around as devil's advocates or something.

Interview with Iona, October 1997.

Feral has become very much a term of abuse, for people who think of themselves as hippies or alternatives, for them, ferals are scum, ferals are the people they don't like. ... [T]he ferals were seen as dirty, disgusting, horrible ...

Interview with Cass, October 1997

Ferals spend their time on the streets and they often hang around on the street in Nimbin in groups of around twenty to twenty-five persons. This can be intimidating (particularly to tourists) and in part explains the resistance to them by some members of the local alternative lifestyle community. Tourists sometimes mistake the ferals for heroin users.

People [visiting] town saw the ferals, knew there was a smack scene, and went, "Oh, they'd be junkies." When in fact some of the ferals used smack, and some of the junkies looked a bit ferally, but they are two really different scenes.

Interview with Cass, October 1997

Over the course of this research the term feral appears to have changed. When I first heard the term, I understood ferals to be people running around in the bush, living in

¹¹¹ Professor Niko Besnier, Victoria University, inaugural lecture, 17th March 1998.

rough camps, killing and eating wild animals for food and wearing their skins. Newspaper articles and television documentaries portrayed their lifestyle as “survivalist.” For a time feral was used to describe street people, itinerants and youthful runaways. Now ferals are seen more as ecological warriors who spend a great deal of their time and energy at the environmental blockades.

The lifestyle of the “marginal” members of the alternative population is as alternative to “mainstream” as any other and they share a relationship to the means of production in common with the rest of the alternative migrants.

5.1.2 Hip capitalists

A few of the original alternative lifestyle settlers are seen to have since undergone a class migration. They have gone from being people who obtained a relatively low income from the land or from benefits, to owning small business enterprises in Nimbin. They have undergone a class migration from benefit peasant to “hip capitalist.”

That's where your other scene is--hip capitalists, people that came as freaks and bought a business and now run a restaurant or bookshop or whatever, and their interest in what they want out of the town changes ... you know, they used to be drug-taking freaks who wanted to have a good time and now they're worried about scaring the customers off ...

Interview with Micky, October 1997

Some of the new migrants to the area are from the same socio-economic and age cohorts as the original settlers.¹¹² This means that they are migrating at a different stage in their lifecycle and with more resources than were available to the first alternative lifestyle migrants. They tend to have higher levels of resources (including the ability to obtain work) and are able to invest more strongly in new lifestyle.

The new settler of the 80's, even if she/he intended joining a land co-operative, would need to have saved several thousand dollars to buy a share - a far cry from the \$200 of the early days of Tumble Falls. So more recent settlers are slightly older

¹¹² “Dole-bulger ‘myth’ exploded,” *Northern Star*, 6 June, 1998, 5.

when they leave the city for Nimbin ... They cannot be defined in the old way of “hippies” or “straights” – they are neither, and both.

Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982, 1982, 141.

One of the effects of this migration has been to push land prices up, leading to increased rates. Also these migrants place higher demands on the council – they want more than to be permitted to build houses on their land and to be left alone. This cohort wants promotion of the area, curbing and guttering, car-parking so that the tourists can get easy access to their businesses, controls over street-use and so on.

Nimbin definitely has a middle-class movement happening, you know, it’s getting more middle-class, more gentrified and stuff, and it’s who can afford to live there.

Interview with Micky, October 1997.

Such migration shows how media popularity, tourism and a different class migration can lead to increasing costs (for example, higher government valuation means higher rates) and can force another (outward) migration for the less well off land-owners. If the block of land next door is sold for a million dollars, then, by implication, all the land is worth that. Currently rainforest is “trendy” and suddenly the property owned by some alternatives is very valuable.¹¹³ Some people who bought their land cheaply 25 years ago are paying more in rates per annum than the original total purchase price. In the intervening time they’ve reforested and the land looks beautiful again.

The urban to rural migration of the alternative lifestyle population is different from counter-urbanisation because the primary migration of this group pre-dated this current trend for moving away from the cities. The migration of the first of the alternative lifestyle participants into the Rainbow Region began around 1973. The process of counter-urbanisation occurred a decade or more later.

¹¹³ Witness the purchase of a Byron Bay property by actor Paul Hogan.

Is the back to the land movement different to counter-urbanisation? The greater wealth of the counter-urban migrants and their continued daily association with the city for their livelihood and lifestyle differentiate them from the alternative lifestyle migration.

The original alternative lifestyle migrants bought (or bought shares in) large amounts of land – usually entire farms, not rural sub-divisions like the hobby farmer and counter-urbanite. The value of that land in agricultural terms was low and it was therefore affordable, whereas the hobby farmer tends to purchase quality farmland. Types of land ownership differ too. While the original alternative lifestyle migrants were less well off, and tended to co-operate in order to afford blocks of land, the hobby farmers can afford to purchase expensive land on their own – without the complexities of shares, cross-leases, and other multiple-ownership legal structures.

The amount of investment they make further demonstrates the differences between “normal” counter-urbanisation and the alternative migration to the Northern Rivers. While land prices in Nimbin for a hobby farm have only recently exceeded the \$200,000 mark (and made the news) these prices were more normal for a 10-acre “lifestyle” block in the Hunter Valley in the early to mid-1980s.¹¹⁴ The cost of land means that land ownership in areas popular for counter-urbanisation settlements like the Hunter Valley is out of the reach of the people who have migrated to places like Nimbin.

The Nimbin migrants have chosen the Rainbow Region because it was effectively distant from (rather than near to) the cities, and land prices were lower as a result. The alternative migrants tend not to get major profits from their land, and they are seldom able to use their land as either a demonstration of their wealth, or as a tax write-off. In her definitions, Alison Taylor made distinctions on the amount of investment between the new alternative lifestyle settlers and the rural retreaters, hobby farmers and people investing in rural land with an eye to profiting from it, and she is right to do so.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ “Nimbin booms,” *Northern Star*, 27 February 1997.

¹¹⁵ Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, vi-vii.

Both share the features of moving from the cities to the countryside for lifestyle reasons, and living on the land in ways different from traditional farming life. The differences between the original Aquarian migration and the counter-urbanisation are in many ways the effects of the *timing* of the migration. Keeping in mind the mainly white-collar class background of the early alternative lifestyle migrants, you could see counter-urbanisation migration as being people from similar background migrating at a different time in their lifecycle. Having been workers for an extra 25-odd years, they have more money to invest, and different needs than the pioneer Aquarian migrants, who were still young, often single and still childless, and relatively poor in the 1970s.

5.1.3 Out-migration of alternative settlers

Many people come to Nimbin for a short period of time, and then move on. The high turnover of children in the local schools is testament to the mobility of the population.¹¹⁶ The alternative lifestyle population are more thoroughly linked to the city and city life than other migrants and they move between the country and the city more frequently and with more ease than other rural populations.

It was interchangeable to the point where I remember when they did one of their drug surveys, and they asked people in Kings Cross where they hung out from the Cross, and Nimbin was the next most common place. I think this was [in the] mid-eighties.

Interview with Micky, October 1997.

Migration between the cities and a rural life-style remains an option, but work is largely dependent on an urban economy. So some people talk about having “the best of both worlds,” which is entirely possible given the low material investment in both urban and rural life.

I'm enamoured of the idea of moving up to Johnny's. Johnny's got five years on that land and two hundred acres, for about ten bucks a week I could have my ... couple

¹¹⁶ See discussion in *HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTION: Children as Production*, page 177.

of acres. ... But the other thing is that I don't want to be that far away from working. **I still want to work.**

Interview with Andy in Sydney, July 1996. [Emphasis mine.]

Movement into and out of the economic classes, from proletarian and “available to work” in the cities to “unavailable” in the country, is possible. There is considerable mobility as this group takes advantage of work opportunities. Some people leave the area as their short-term contract work in the cities extends to full-time work, or as they start up new businesses in the cities, often using skills learned and developed during their stay in Nimbin.

For many of the people who migrate into the area, a change in their circumstances sometimes results in migration out of the area at a later date. Those that stay, do so for other reasons, even though escaping urban poverty may have been the primary cause of their original migration from the city. For example, a high number of people manage to complete formal education qualifications while they are in the Nimbin area, people who would have found it more difficult to succeed in the cities. Partly this is due to a lower cost of living, more personal support, and more flexibility in how people's lives are lived. Many of these opportunities would have been, technically speaking, available to these migrants in the city, but at a prohibitive cost.

Other (usually less well off) alternative migrants leave to buy affordable land elsewhere, sometimes using the proceeds of cannabis sales for the deposit, and the security of benefit cheques to cover the mortgage. Some people are forced out by rising local body rates, while increased land values enable landowners to sell and purchase elsewhere. Others become tired of the “Nimbin circus” or feel that the “Nimbin dream” had been lost somewhere along the way, and leave to start again elsewhere. In the mid-1990s many of the less well-off alternatives migrated out of Nimbin to the land in the West, where the land was cheaper.

As to why those people are here, it could be that Nimbin was too airy-fairy and hippie for them and they're a bit more pragmatic and down to earth. It could be that it's cheaper out here, or ... maybe got chopped up a bit later, by which time people with this sort of money couldn't afford to buy on the coast. Out here, there's

a lot of just people that are still just ... working class people, who survive in the bush without pretence of being on any sort of groovy motive, you know. Just, sort of, "I've got my piece of land, that'll do."

Interview with Micky, October 1997.

Other migrants simply wanted to be more isolated, and the high density living around Nimbin made that impossible. For some, it was a business decision – an investment in land and machinery to grow cash crops, particularly people who were growing cannabis commercially and needed the isolation to hide their crop.

5.1.4 Selling out or normal change over time?

The claim that the original Aquarian migrants have in some way "sold out" because they've got a television, drive a car, go to work, or got married, can be more usefully explained in terms of change and adaptation, rather than some betrayal of a "dream." Over time, several phenomena have forced adaptations onto the lifestyle and ideology of the original migrants in the 25-odd years since they settled in the Rainbow Region. These factors include lifestyle changes to adjust to their differing needs and aspirations that are thrown up by being older, by having children, and the age and level of independence of those children, owning a home, finding or creating work and so on.

The image of an ageing (ex 1960's) counter-cultural radical, now quietly slipping into bourgeois ways, is a common (and comical?) media theme. ... Participants excuse their bourgeois accommodation with trite comments on how youthful ideals change over time, and how having children changes one, nevertheless the radical modification of utopian ideas, particularly in rural secular groups, is almost universal.

Metcalf, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986, Section 9.4. 187.

In 1991, Peter Couchman, host of the programme, *Couchman Over Australia*, visited Nimbin. He accused the "successful" alternative lifestyle participants of "selling out their dream" and intimated that they had "grown up," implying they had outgrown their childish and ideological aspirations. He also pointed out that figures show that it is very much a middle class and middle-aged movement. This raises some interesting points about cultural change and the alternative movement. Why is it that the mass media argue

that alternatives have “sold out” their dream if their culture changes over time, yet the mainstream is allowed the privilege of responding to changing material and social conditions? These issues are widely discussed in Nimbin and within the alternative movement generally. In an interview with Iona, she commented:

I think the whole move towards the land by hippies or freaks or whatever is a process that maybe has reached its peak. I mean, you read magazines like *Grassroots*, there's still people doing it, but I think there's also a big enough core of communities there, with people moving off and on, moving away from the community so that other people that want to live on communities can go onto existing ones, and as that generation's got a lot of people who want to live that sort of lifestyle get older, there's going to be even more tempted to go onto existing communities, where stuffs been worked out, about whether the physical infrastructure or whether the social infrastructure, you know, the community's settled down enough to know, yes, it's going to happen this way or that way, we're going to have these rules, and this will work or no, this isn't working, we'll get rid of it, a lot a of the idealistic stuff might have been dropped, and they've just settled down to something pragmatic.

Interview with Iona, December 1996.

People and a culture that hadn't changed and developed in 25 years would look pathological, so many aspects of the “selling out” argument are baseless. The other thing is, “whose dream” are we talking about? The people who actually live in Nimbin have responded to real, material experiences – their lifestyle and ideology have been honed on reality – whereas the people who liked the back-to-the-land ideas of the 1970s haven't had their “dream” tested in real life. Changing cultural priorities can now be explained without recourse to a moral judgement of “selling out.” As a person who actually lives in Nimbin so pungently put it, “I don't see why I should have to live out anybody's vision.”

I think it's really difficult for those of us who actually live here, because people expect us to sort of behave in a certain way, you know to be some kind of visionary society, to live out those ideals of the '70's and I mean basically it's the '90's, I don't see why I should have to live out anybody's vision.

Aquarius Revisited: Under the Rainbow – Still Dreaming, That's History Programme, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1993.

In her definition of the alternative lifestyle culture, Taylor concluded, “Not all aspects need to have alternative values and some normal, conventional characteristics are easily incorporated.”¹¹⁷ This simple insight (so obvious that it is almost invisible to some critical observers) contains the key to why the alternative culture is so strong, even though it may have changed quite significantly and come far from the original ideas of self-sufficiency and a rebellious youth culture.

5.2 Dialectics of acceptance and resistance

The integration of an identifiable group into a larger community is a dialectical process of acceptance, resistance and modification. This is complicated by different levels of acceptance – ranging from “instrumental” acceptance through to more intimate emotional links between the groups. Some of the acceptance is conditional – and depends on the “behaviour” of each of the groups and how they are viewed by the other. That acceptance can be reviewed (withdrawn) at any time, and cultural clashes can often be traced to economic conflicts of interests.

There are many indicators of how well a migrant ethnic group is integrated into the host community. Traditionally these indicators include how long the migrants have been in their new community, whether a gender balance has been achieved, whether or not the migrants are politically and socially active in their new locality, levels of inter-group hostility and co-operation, and whether or not clear divisions or boundaries remain between the cultural groups.

In the case of the alternative lifestyle participants, however, integration is somewhat less predictable. The alternative lifestyle migrants come from *within* the same country, and from the same cultural stock. This suggests that they would integrate quickly and relatively smoothly. However, coming from the city implies some significant cultural differences to rural lifestyles and culture. They occupy a different class position to their straight neighbours. This impacted upon the speed and depth of integration into their

¹¹⁷ Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, vii.

“host” community at the time of first settlement and continues to do so. The alternative lifestyle community established itself as “counter-cultural” and doesn’t necessarily agree with many of the social or economic forms of their own mainstream culture.

There is a tension between the political economy of the rural periphery and the economic influence and lifestyles of the urban core. In many ways, the migration of the alternative lifestyle participants is an extension of core influences into the rural hinterland. You could see the opposition of the original farming families to the invasion of the alternative lifestyle culture as their resistance to domination (at least from a local point of view) by core forces who colonise the economy and culture of a rural area like Nimbin with city culture, city people and city money.

The original core-periphery model did not allow for reaction and resistance to these processes. The periphery is not the passive recipient of all that the core deals out. Despite its relative powerlessness, the subordinate area (or culture) always responds – for every movement (action) there is a counter-movement (reaction). The periphery constantly adjusts and accommodates in order to survive.

Despite the dominance of the core over the rural sector, it does not exclude an active engagement by the representatives of the reactionary rural economy with the core on its own behalf. There are agencies within the rural sector representing people within the “straight” rural community, like, for instance, the powerful National Farmers Federation. The rise of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation in the 1990s was a reaction by some of the same people in cahoots with the New Right forces, and significantly, its main platforms are anti-migrant and anti-beneficiary.

5.2.1 Indicators of integration

The fact that the initial Aquarian migration comprised mostly young adults was another boundary marker between the alternative settlers and the straight population. This cluster of same-age migrants would not have occurred naturally in a small rural town. And it did give the new settlers political strength. As Kali McLaughlin commented a great number of like-minded people were all facing the same things at around the same

time (i.e. house-building, having children, educational issues and so on) and this gave them the numbers for concerted political pressure for authorities to provide services.

Tunable always had lots of people here but they were all roughly the same age, all socially and economically the same and all trying to achieve the same thing. It was a real problem because everything was either crowded or else nothing was doing. But over the years, the community's rounded out. Different ages, different social positions of people. Some people work, some people don't. Some people have kids, some people are retired.

Profiles: Kali on Alternative Energy," *Nimbin News*, August-September 1998, 7.

The fact of the large numbers of young alternative lifestyle participants concentrated in one area may have suggested a strong counter-cultural milieu when it was perhaps just as much a demonstration of their interests in terms of city upbringing and lifecycle requirements. In other words, the concentration of a young, urbanised population in a small rural area may have made them appear more potent as a political force than they really were. The acceptance by the mainstream of many of the "personal freedom" aspects of the culture (especially regarding family relationships) shows that their time had come.

Children of alternative migrants and the original straight population were likely to have grown up together (unlike their parents' generation) going to the same pre-schools and schools. The contact they've had with each other over the last 25 years will have had an integrating effect, even though the ethnic differences are sometimes played out in the school ground.

Not a lot of animosity between them, although I have seen kids playing freaks and cops, or hippies and cops, rather than cowboys and indians. Definitely kids playing dope busts, "Here come the helicopters, let's run away."

Interview with Micky, October 1997.

The size of the migrating population has had a huge impact upon integration and acceptance. In the case of Nimbin, the alternatives eventually took over the town.

There were still straight people living in houses on the main street ... the last of the ... beef-eating, red-neck people ... they'd sort of moved out of town. For a while

[they] made their presence known, weren't giving in easily, but eventually they just got swamped by the numbers.

Interview with Cass, October 1997

This sense that Nimbin is the hub of the hippie empire, or the alternative capital of Australia, means that in Nimbin it is the tourists and the “straights that are the freaks,” and that the alternatives are “normal.”

At the beginning of school I found that the hippie-straight thing was really intense: I left school for a year, because it was hippie table, straight table, you eat brown bread with hippies, white bread with straights. We got called hippie-hoppers which we found extremely offensive at the time. Then I think that the alternative kids started to equal their numbers and then *in the end we almost out-numbered the local straight kids*, and the tables were turned and we did give them a really hard time so ... [Apologetic shrug].

Sensitive New Age Guse, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993. [Emphasis mine.]

Differences between rural and urban

In my first week after migrating from Sydney I went to get milk kindly provided by a neighbour. The farmer looked at me closely and asked, “Just up from the city are you?” “Yes,” I replied. “Well,” he said, casting an expansive arm, “this here’s a dairy farm, and those,” he said, pointing towards the milking shed, “are cows.” I was vastly amused by the presumption of complete ignorance, and cheekily decided to one-up him. “Milk-fat levels getting a bit low are they? I see you’re keeping your Jersey calves,” I replied. At this point he stared at me for a while. “Know a bit about farming do you?” he asked. I explained that I was born in a country town, my maternal grandparents had been farmers and I’d spent my university holidays working on the family farm, and also my stepfather had been a dairy farmer.

This is interesting because although this background might have suggested me as a non-alternative migrant, subsequent events showed that the straight community had little facility to apprehend me as “one of them” unless I was in a “straight” rural job or married to a man in such a job. An (urbanite) reader of a draft of this thesis annotated this anecdote: “We don’t need to know this.” Yet that was *just my point*. One of the big

differences between country and city is that things that look irrelevant in the city are often matters of considerable social and economic importance in the country. City people have different interests and knowledge than country people, and it is just these kinds of facts that show the divisions between them. Dairy fat represents money to farmers: for city people, it is an irrelevant detail.

Straight culture in the region has basically no resources for absorbing urban migrants, or for socialising them into rural life. Instead it has the mechanism of apprehending urban to rural migrants as alternative lifestyle participants, which it then does. The exceptions are usually the adult children of farming families who have come back to the farm after working in the city.

Because of the nature of the migrant population, being mostly well-educated Australian citizens, the rural sector had little or no economic power to repel the “alternative” or “new settler” invasion. Given the sheer numbers of the alternative invasion, and the fact of their counter-cultural ideology (which sees resistance to their ideas as a form of external validation) neither moral nor legal pressure did much to keep them out. The following interview was recorded during the Aquarius Festival in 1973.

Mrs Alley: I'm quite worried about my children and the environment that they're in while the Aquarius are here. My daughter went up to a friend's place and they went to the park, and one of the Aquarius girls, she started ... speaking on Hinduism, Buddhism and all the other isms my daughter told me ... which I didn't feel was right. And uhm, if they want to have their festival, maybe keep to themselves, and ... because they're making out that they're taking over the town, and you can't find a parking spot to start with when you go up town, all their vehicles are there, and ...

Interviewer: But don't you agree Mrs Alley, that if Nimbin gets the sort of publicity that Aquarius is bound to bring it, that that will mean that perhaps young people from this area will come back to live here once more?

Mrs Alley: [Not answering question but continuing on original tangent.] Well apparently a lot of the Aquarius is going to stay on, and if they'd've come and they'd've gone, p'raps everyone'd been happy. But we've had them around, you know, going back six weeks or more already and they quite openly say they're going to stay on.

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

It is because of the relative powerlessness of the rural sector that the alternative community were able to settle and develop their new lifestyle without significant organised opposition from the original inhabitants in the early stages of the alternative migration.

These rural-urban differences are often expressed in terms of “length of time.” The length of time that a migrant group has lived in the region is another factor in integration and acceptance. It shows in Nimbin, for example, when the original “new settlers” feel different from the most recent migrants, and the straight locals make distinctions between the first wave of alternative lifestyle settlers and those that followed.

A straight friend and rural inhabitant, recently complained to me about neighbours: “They’ve only been here five minutes and they’re already causing trouble.” The neighbour had in fact been in the area for five *years*, but in this conflict their activities had re-defined them as a “new comer” with city habits in a country area.

In and Around Bentley is a book written by local historian Helen Trustrum, and was published to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Bentley Hall in 1985. Bentley is a locality not far from Nimbin where there are significant numbers of alternative lifestyle settlers. In the book, the original farming families all rated a mention – the people, where their farm was located, who farms it now, and so on. These pioneers all arrived in the first white migration wave around the turn of the century in order to establish the farmlands. At the back of the book there was short section entitled “Newcomers.” Some of these “newcomers” had been living in Bentley since the 1950s implying that comparatively speaking your family can still be a “new settler” after 40-odd years of residence. However, included in this history book were *farming* families who arrived as late as 1985 (the year that the book came out). Significantly, *none* of the “newcomers” listed are identifiably members of the alternative community, despite the fact that the first wave of alternative settlers arrived in the early 1970s, and have been living there for over 25 years, many years longer than some of the other (straight) newcomers who were

included in the book.¹¹⁸ By implication the *alternative* new settlers are not included in the same way that newly arrived *straight* settlers who perform “traditional” rural work are integrated.

This is an example of the subtle ways alternative lifestyle participants can be excluded from the “real” community. Sometimes exclusion is deliberate, and at other times it is an oversight, the result of a cultural blind spot and demonstrates the lack of social interaction between the groups. What this shows is that integration can be measured on many levels, and sometimes it is the unconscious inclusions and exclusions that betray the real level of integration of a group into a community.

Cultural differences and use of recreational drugs

The use of illegal recreational drugs was one of the early political (and cultural) signifiers of straight and alternative. The early conflict over drugs culminated in 1978 in a confrontation that became known as the Uki Hotel Riot. The local branch representative of the Australian Marijuana Party had been persuaded to give a policy speech at the Hotel. He had agreed because he thought the locals might genuinely want to know about the party and policy platform. As he began, he and other alternative people present were verbally abused, and one of the supporters was hit over the head with a chair and required six stitches to close the resulting wound. Despite further provocation, the new settlers left without retaliation. The two people who had repeatedly requested that the Marijuana Party representative speak at the Hotel did not turn up to the event. The option of laying charges was discussed at a public meeting, and later dropped. It transpired that some locals believed that the alternative settlers were giving marijuana and heroin to their children. The alternative lifestyle people at that meeting argued that, like many Australian adolescents at the time, local kids were already using

¹¹⁸ Trustum, *In and Around Bentley*, 1985, 230-233.

illegal recreational drugs before the alternatives arrived.¹¹⁹ Many of the straight people in the area were embarrassed by this event – and felt that things had “gone too far.”

Recreational use of drugs was one of the big issues that divided (and divides) the original farming population from the alternative lifestyle population. Some of the problem was caused by a lack of empirical information about the relative dangers of different kinds of drugs, and quite a few of the original straight families equated cannabis with “hard” drugs, believing their children were being introduced to drug use by the alternative lifestyle settlers. This wasn’t justified because there was a cultural revolution in progress, and the widespread availability of instant media – affordable personal transistor radios and family television sets – meant that the rural youth were exposed to and influenced by many of the same things as young adults in the cities.

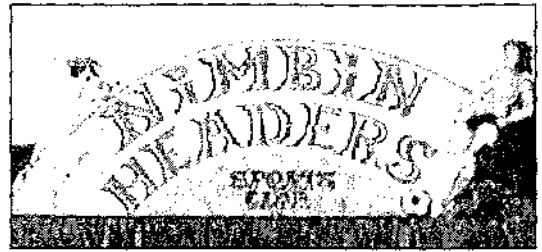
Even now drug use is a matter that causes dissension between the straight and alternative communities at Nimbin, and concern within the alternative community itself. During the filming of a 1991 *Couchman Over Australia* television programme, a local straight stood up from the audience to say that most of the hippies are nice people, but “they’ve brought murder and trouble to the area.” He went on to complain about hippies not working but able to afford 4-wheel drive vehicles while he couldn’t. The people at the meeting met this claim with ironical applause. Then a woman stood up to challenge the stereotype of alternative lifestyle participants as all being drug dealers.¹²⁰

Drug use (and presumed drug use) means that social distance tends to be maintained, and this is demonstrated in the lack of personal interaction between the two groups. Straights and alternative lifestyle participants don’t tend to visit each other’s homes very much. Like other migrants, alternative parents will often send their children on errands that involve dealing with straights – paying rent or buying eggs for example – errands that they themselves are more likely to do if the interaction involved other alternatives.

¹¹⁹ This account from Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 46-7.

¹²⁰ *Couchman Over Australia*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1991.

Sports teams are sometimes divided along ethnic lines. There are three soccer clubs in Nimbin, one the domain of alternative soccer enthusiasts. This reflects the political action (setting up their own club) taken by the soccer



enthusiasts after they were rejected from the straight club on “cultural” grounds (because they smoked cannabis) and this is reflected in the name they gave it, “Headers,” which contains the double reference to heading a soccer ball and a slang name for the users of cannabis.

When I first began research for this thesis, cannabis use was one of the indicators of “bent” versus “straight.” Drug use is no longer such a hard and fast signifier of alternative, as cannabis use becomes more common among the straight population and the age group that was exposed to those drugs as part of their growing up are now middle-aged. While in the past you could be sure if someone smoked cannabis that they were “cool,” it is no longer the case.

Australians abandoning alcohol for marijuana

“Marijuana is now playing the role that alcohol used to play,” said Professor Kenneth Clements from the [University of Western Australia’s] Economic Research Center.

“The growth in marijuana consumption offsets the fall in the consumption of alcohol, so they’re substitutes.”

Expenditure on marijuana is already equal to that of wine and spirits, and is about three-quarters of beer expenditure, according to *The Economics of Marijuana Consumption* report.

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The police are making almost no impact on cannabis use. This suggests that not only is the number of users growing, its *social* legitimacy is also growing.¹²² This general acceptance of cannabis use has had some ironical consequences for some people in

¹²¹ <http://www.nandotimes.com>

¹²² “Our Police Ineffective?” *Nimbin News*, June–July 1998, 20.

Nimbin. Dismayed at the use of “harder” drugs like heroin in the town, concerned citizens called a public meeting. As the following account shows, “drugs” and cannabis are not equivalents in some people’s minds.¹²³

Public pressure went on, fits were getting found in car-parks, kids getting jabbed by needles by this stage, vigilantes were beating up junkies, people are od-ing—it’s all happening.¹²⁴ ... There were a few public meetings, with much indignation when the cops started searching cars the next day and busting people for small amounts of grass. ... [Lots of people were] getting harassed, getting busted for grass, and people were complaining, “You busted me for grass and I was at the public meeting *against* the drugs!”

Interview with Micky, May 1998.

However, some of the material and ideological features of the alternative lifestyle make it more likely that, as a group or class, they could use other illegal drugs.¹²⁵ Carol de Launey found that over half the Nimbin sample reported having tried hallucinogens, compared to 7% nationally. This is certainly not to say that all or even most alternative lifestyle participants actually do so, only that as a group they are generally more likely to try other drugs.¹²⁶

¹²³ Likewise, when people have a “no smoking” household it is not necessarily a non-cannabis smoking household.

¹²⁴ A “fit” is slang for syringe, abbreviated from “injecting outfit.”

¹²⁵ Carol de Launey found that 17% of those persons surveyed in Nimbin reported that they had used (in their lifetime) heroin, in comparison to National Drug Surveys from 1993 and 1995 of 1% and 2%. Carol de Launey, *Use of Cannabis and Other Drugs in Nimbin*, Draft Paper, 1997, 5. As an analogy, the high-stress lifestyle of doctors coupled with money and access to high-quality drugs makes it more likely they will use narcotics, but that doesn’t mean that every doctor has taken advantage of this easy availability of drugs. However, as an occupational group, they are among the “high users.” See for example the article at the web-address, <http://www/ireland.iol.ie/tflmacpub/imm/a98oct19/story5.html>, “Opiate addiction not uncommon among Irish medical profession.”

¹²⁶ de Launey, *Use of Cannabis and Other Drugs in Nimbin*, Draft Paper, 1997, 7.

Many features of their lifestyle predispose them to this. First, they have lower expectations of material wealth, and money spent in this way is not always seen as squandered.

Second, as a community they have already resolved for themselves many of the issues of using recreational drugs and developed an ideology that sustains those ideas, including having attitudes that are pro-drug experimentation and new experiences, and a higher than average lifetime drug usage. Take for example the alternative lifestyle participants' alienation from the legal system, or the widespread idea that altered states of consciousness (from LSD or hallucinogenic mushrooms for example) are interesting rather than frightening.

Third, these factors are coupled to a sometimes-high cash income from the sale of cannabis. This can mean that this income is considered "surplus" and is spent on pleasure, and recreational drug use can be extremely pleasurable. Fourth, being in Nimbin means that little time needs to elapse between deciding you might like to use a certain drug and actually obtaining and enjoying it, a speed untypical of other country towns the same size.

Beneficiaries as "bludgers"

The idea that alternative lifestyle migrants had moved to the area for an easy life on some kind of a benefit didn't sit well with some people in the hard-working farming community either. This could be seen as a critique of the alternative lifestyle by the straight community. The straight population are by and large denied the same opportunities for that lifestyle because they tend to own productive property and, regardless of its indebtedness, their high level of assets disqualifies them from getting many benefits. Not to be underestimated is the social pressure that is brought to bear on people in small towns coupled with the pro-work (Protestant ethic) cultural priorities of the straight community.

At the meeting, the new settlers were criticised for many failings. A publican accused them of preferring tequila and Southern Comfort to beer. A doctor accused them of "burying their babies in the bush" and of transmitting marijuana "within

and without the schools to the serious detriment of education.” They were lambasted for being dirty and for being dole bludgers.

Horin, *National Times*, 4 November 1978, 13.¹²⁷

While they occupy a position of a newly arrived (first generation) ethnic minority, alternative lifestyle settlers share with other ethnic migrants features like a higher than average birth-rate, are blamed for increasing the crime rate, and are socially isolated from the mainstream life of their host community.

Shared outlooks and co-operation

The degree of community harmony needs to be charted with reference to the political and economic environment the groups are acting within. Even then, there is a complex interplay between acceptance and resistance. Take for example the attitudes of the straights to the arrival of the first alternative settlers in the early 1970s to Nimbin. By some straights they were viewed negatively, and others were positive because the alternative migrants brought new life to the area. The local “straight” inhabitants were well aware of the perils to their community and livelihood of the falling rural population, and many welcomed the arrival of the new settlers. The increase in population kept rural schools and hospitals open, local shops and banks operating, and buses and rural mail services running.

The rural community has for a long time suffered social inadequacies and disadvantages. Basic welfare problems do exist, including a lack of general opportunity, rural poverty, disadvantage through isolation, lack of welfare services, restricted educational opportunities and limited access to health services. [T]hrough their numbers alone they [new settlers] can provide vital numbers to restore the viability of certain functions. [Latona, 1978, 19.]

Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 21.

¹²⁷ Cited in Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 18-19.



When the Nimbin Rubbish Tip faced closure in 1991, the Nimbin Wastebusters were formed in order to establish and run a community recycling and waste transfer facility.
 Photo: Northern Star. [Picture and caption sourced from the 1998 Visions of Nimbin fund-raising calendar.]

The children of straight rural families face the same challenges of unemployment if they remain in the area. This has brought home to some formerly critical straight people that a more rational response is that if there aren't enough jobs, then non-workers are inevitable, and it is better that

unemployed people live a decent life in the Nimbin area.

When people migrate to the countryside for a better way of life it strikes a chord with the residents (both the original straight population and first of the alternative lifestyle settlers). It is a validation of the choices that they themselves have made to stay on the land, of the economic decisions and the sacrifices they have made in order to live in the country. Many rural people point to the fact they could get higher wages for fewer hours in the cities. The critique of urban life is shared by both parties, and both the new settlers and the original straight farming population have a strong bond to the land.

Co-operation occurs as the straights and alternatives combine to defend or promote their shared economic interests in their rural way of life. For example, there has been straight-alternative collaboration in community efforts to keep schools and hospitals open, to manage a recycling centre at the dump, to develop a sewerage system, to enhance the appearance of Nimbin's streetscape, and to pressure the Council for better roading and parking.

5.3 How did this class of benefit peasants come into being?

The alternative lifestyle migration replaced traditional farmers with urbanites and urban culture and developed non-traditional ways of making an income off the land. Now I

will show that while the alternative lifestyle is land-based, the major source of income for the alternative lifestyle group is the state.

If these migrants had remained in the cities, mere unemployment would not have separated them from the wage-earning proletariat. They would not have migrated into a separate micro-class because they would have remained available for recruitment into waged jobs. As part of the reserve army of labour they would have remained part of the urban working class. Migration to Nimbin, because it reduces the likelihood of full-time work, constitutes a class transition *out* of the working class, into the benefit peasantry class.

I tie their migration from the city to the long history of core countries exporting their malcontents through emigration. The desire of 95,000 people around Australia to begin an alternative lifestyle was related to the possibility of expelling malcontents from the city with a view to resolving social conflict caused by unemployment or other capitalist ills.¹²⁸ It relates strongly to the alternative migration because that's the very process by which the original white settlement of Australia was founded: there is a neat analogy to the fact that many malcontents emigrated from the core European countries. The scale of the migration, in terms of the number of people migrating relative to the total working class population at the time that it was being pacified, is comparable.

In order to move a big enough population, the cadre needed for expulsion had to include some long-term urban dwellers due to the rapidly contracting employment market post-1974. It has been a large-scale migration, as big as the migration from Niue to New Zealand, but unique (for its time) in that it was a reversal of that periphery to core, rural to urban migration.

The fact that the alternatives are making the best of migrating out of the cities and living on a benefit actually assists capitalism because these same people, mobilised into an organised force against capitalism, would be a significant problem for the state to deal

¹²⁸ Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 2.

with. Urban alternatives tend to be formidable organisers either as rank and file members or as leaders such as union officials. Several of these issues are picked up in the following quotes.

The skills needed for a successful social action – meeting skills, goal setting, motivation and management of volunteers, conflict resolution, identification of resources, publicity and promotion, media management, strategy and tactics for achieving the goal – are the same skills as are needed to organise a successful festival. So skilling for the organisation of community festivals is also skilling for effective social action in defence of community values.

Dunstan, *Images From the Edge*, Position Paper, 1994, 12.

Now, the dole, a lot of people, I'd say, would see it like a rural subsidy. It helps people to establish themselves ... I think people in power, the bureaucracy, the politicians – can see that ... there aren't enough jobs for everyone, there are a lot of people who are disillusioned with society – and both for those people and for society itself, it's good for them to have a way where they can check out other ways of doing things, other ways of living, and I think it's been a good safety valve for society. [Doug McPherson.]

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

This “safety valve” is subsidised by using money gathered from all taxpayers to pay benefits to people who are not in waged work. The capitalist employers spread the burden of supporting beneficiaries among the entire population, and in this way all workers further subsidise their exploiters.

What does the state get in return? This is a very interesting question: I think the state gets social calm, which is economically important. Keeping cheaply produced workers at hand means that the core does not have to import workers from overseas, or lose them to jobs overseas. The state gets a pool of highly educated workers who are willing to temporarily migrate to the urban core for short periods of work and then return to the

rural periphery, without demanding redundancy. In addition the state gets high-quality workers reproduced at very little cost.¹²⁹

Moreover, if there is a sudden upswing in demand for skilled workers, they can be recalled from their rural “back-burner” rather than incur the expense involved in recruiting, supporting and acculturating international migrants. This might prove to be especially true with the anti-migrant political backlash that is periodically whipped up. Coupled with changes to benefit entitlement regulations, this “resource” of well-educated, socially integrated and under-utilised workers becomes very attractive. Like other migrant workers this group is difficult to unionise when they visit the city to work.

The availability of social security benefits gives some alternative lifestyle participants choices unavailable to migrants from other countries, who are required to be in “gainful employment” to qualify for citizenship.

While the actual numbers who made the migration were small, figures show that the number of people who felt attracted to the idea showed that it had the potential to significantly ease the problem of unemployment and political dissension if this had proved necessary.

A few can make it. The class can never follow. It is through the good number trying, however, that the class structure is legitimated. ...

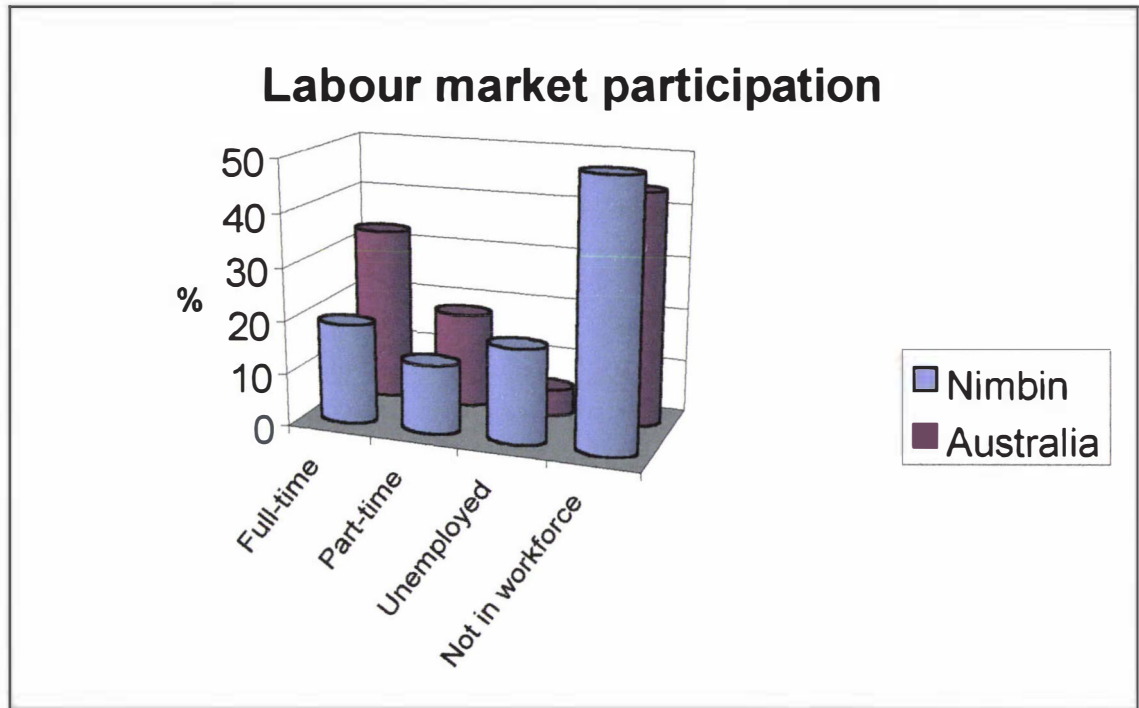
Willis, *Learning to Labour*, 1977, 128.

To some extent the alternative lifestyle philosophy can be seen to be coming into its time. Like the myth of upward class mobility I expect the prospect of rustication might be a growing aspiration among many and achieved by only a few – but, like the prospect of holidays – working and saving up for the 10 acre block has the effect of assuring class collaboration because more people commit themselves to working hard towards this dream than actually achieve it.

¹²⁹ This will be covered in the section in HOUSEHOLD-CENTRED PRODUCTION: Children as Production, page 177.

5.3.1 Labour market fluctuations

While the alternative lifestyle participants' migration pattern is a reversal of the traditional rural to urban migration, it is arguably driven by labour market conditions – an oversupply of labour. This migration has led to the formation of a local class of non-workers who, by inhabitation of the area, “earn” their entitlement to a benefit.



The work profile of the alternative lifestyle community has a different structure to that of the mainstream workforce. In every respect, the Nimbin sample were less connected with wage labour than the Australian average. Nimbin residents were more likely to be outside the workforce altogether – 50% compared to the Australian average of 44%. If they did participate they were much more likely to be unemployed – 18% compared to 5%. If they were employed it was more likely to be part-time, with 41% of employed Nimbin workers being part-time compared to the national average of 35% of workers.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Figures taken from the demographic comparisons between Carol de Launey's Nimbin sample and 1993 NCADA data. (NCADA stands for National Campaign Against Drug Abuse.) See de Launey, Draft Paper, *Use of Cannabis and Other Drugs in Nimbin*, 1997, 16. (Table 4.)

This profoundly different labour-market structure underlies the possibility for class migration into the benefit peasantry along with a geographical migration from a city to Nimbin. The shortage of waged work in the Nimbin area, taken together with the availability of benefits, can be seen as an abundant supply of available economic roles in the area as beneficiaries.

5.3.2 Ability to work depends on the availability of work

The alternative lifestyle migrants simply responded to short-term fluctuations in the labour market. The main migration to the Nimbin area occurred as the labour market contracted and it is useful to see their lifestyle as an adaptation to unemployment.

Their migration out of the core urban areas represents a migration *away* from work, away from the expectation that they will look for and find full-time employment. It is, for them, an acknowledgement of structural unemployment and a means of coping with it. This is true, too, of other beneficiaries, not just people receiving unemployment benefits.

I don't think that these people were *unemployable* in the cities, but certainly they were unlikely to get employment under the conditions of widespread joblessness.

Generally speaking, people on supporting parents' benefits would work if they had realistic opportunities – jobs attracting high enough wages to cover the extra expenses of childcare for example. Likewise, many people in receipt of a disability benefit might work if they could find suitably flexible employment. After all, work is found for all manner of people when there is a good enough reason to warrant the necessary extra costs of employing them.¹³¹ If labour was scarcer then the relative costs of employing

¹³¹ A good example of this is the genius Stephen Hawking. Stephen Hawking is a university professor and has employment despite the fact he cannot speak without a machine and is dependant upon other people for every physical need, because his worth as a researcher is greater than the (high) cost of employing him. Most people with his condition would be in a high-dependency hospital ward.

the so-called unemployable would drop, and more of these beneficiaries would be workers. After all, most of them simply need affordable care for their children, better wages, and flexible work hours.

The rural alternative lifestyle participants are separated from many commodities and services. If you are not pursuing a full-time career-path this is less of a problem. Like other migrations, the transfer of city alternatives to a rural lifestyle has led to a major increase in the amount of labour done within the domestic economy. Within the alternative movement, this is often accompanied by ideological legitimations.

If I was living in the city, bound by a nine to five job, I mean I work up here, part-time, but if I was ... I probably wouldn't have the same opportunities. Here I have the freedom to explore, and so does any other person, to explore all sorts of things. To explore the good and bad sides of me, to feel that it's okay to feel what a beautiful day it is, what a beautiful world we are living in. There's not so much stress.

Sensitive New Age Guise, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

Part-time work is another way that alternative lifestyle participants can be marginalised from the mainstream workforce and into domestic production. This is especially so if the migrants are also raising children, and there is a shortage of employment opportunities that allow them to combine the jobs of paid employment and parenting.¹³² Under-employment, coupled with an alternative lifestyle, can be transformed into a "virtue" in the country where a low level of paid work is financially sustainable on account of a lower cost of living.

5.3.3 Benefit dependency & workforce participation

Many people who have found that a better quality of life on a benefit is achievable in Nimbin. As Tricia Shantz writes, the Nimbin district (taken as a whole) has the highest unemployment rate in the Lismore area at 34.4%.

¹³² See MIGRATION: Migratory Flows, page 108.

There is a disproportionately low level of income and high dependence on social security benefits suggesting a greater reliance on a whole range of public services. The Nimbin district has the highest unemployment rate (34.4%) and the lowest incomes of any area in the Lismore Local Government Area.

Tricia Shantz, Lismore City Council Community Profile, December 1998.

Information from the 1996 Census showed that the highest proportion of family households in the Lismore Local Government Area with a declared income of less than \$499 a week (\$25,948 per annum) resided in Nimbin, comprising 37.1% of the population in the lowest income bracket. Of this group, 11.9 % earned less than \$299 a week (or \$15,548 per annum).¹³³ As a comparison, the median family household income for NSW at the time was \$655 a week.¹³⁴

A profile of the alternative lifestyle participants as persons who obtain state support, in some form or another, for their way of life is inescapable.

5.4 Summary

This section has dealt with migration and tied analysis to the core-periphery framework. It looked at how it became possible for the alternative lifestyle participants to migrate to the Nimbin area. I then considered what effect their arrival into a small locality had in terms of ethnicity-engendering responses.

I would say that as a cohort the young migrants who migrated in the mid-1980s onwards for a better lifestyle on a benefit are in many ways most like the Aquarian settlers used to be, and their relatively large numbers will be pared down slowly over time.

¹³³ 1996 Census information from Lismore City Council, extract from Draft Social Atlas. Tricia Shantz, Lismore City Council. [Personal communication.]

¹³⁴ 1996 Census information from the Australian Bureau of Statistics NSW internet site, <http://www.statistics.gov.au>

Historical materialism directs our attention to the economic and social milieu in which social reality is constructed and acted out, it makes us look at the dialectic between the economic and ideological and forces us to consider both the historical roots of the phenomenon we are looking at and the likely future directions of that phenomenon or social movement. What might appear to be a capitulation to the mainstream is always explicable in terms of the long-term development of that population in that it will accurately reflect their real (as opposed to espoused) material and political interests.

I conclude that their common relationship to the means of production united Nimbin migrants despite their different intentions – that their ideological explanations for why they are there are subordinate in the long term to their common position in the local and national economies.

The next section, PRODUCTION RELATIONS, deals with how the alternative lifestyle participants make a living in the country, and this will provide us with the basis for an evaluation of their class position. It takes as its starting point that most alternatives produce, in the first instance, for their own households.

SECTION III: PRODUCTION RELATIONS

Introduction to Production Relations

The three chapters in this section look at **Household Production**, **Land Use Patterns** and **Cannabis Cropping**. They are united by the fact that they describe the articulation of non-capitalist production with the dominant mainstream capitalist mode of production. The chapters are further united by the fact they examine activities that are supported by the state, either directly, through benefits providing a guaranteed basic income, or indirectly, through subsidies or through the price-control mechanism of policing cannabis production and sale.

I have argued that the benefit peasants, like other peasants, primarily produce for the household. I have also argued that the mode of production (along with the relations of production that it entails) imposes certain conditions on how alternative economics and ideology are expressed in real life. I use a traditional Marxist definition of relations of production to mean –

[S]ocial relations among people evolving irrespective of their will and consciousness ... in the process of the production, distribution, exchange and consumption of material wealth. They are the social form of production through which people appropriate the objects of nature. In their unity with the productive forces, relations of production form a historically defined mode of production.

A Dictionary of Political Economy, Progress Publishers, 1985, 306.

I argue that the definition of work is different under different modes of production. This means I need to re-evaluate what constitutes work for the benefit peasantry, because it is not wage labour as it is under capitalist production.

I think the difficulty in defining what alternatives do as “work” lies in the fact that they are operating in a non-capitalist mode of production that articulates with the mainstream capitalist one. This blurs the picture because the dominant (mainstream) paradigm defines work as paid employment or ownership within capitalist production. This

difficulty also explains why household labour is usually unpaid and not considered to be “work” in modern capitalist society.

Articulation marks the forms of the relationship through which two processes, which remain distinct – obeying their own conditions of existence – are drawn together to form a “complex unity.” This unity is therefore the result of “many determinations,” where the conditions of existence of the one does not coincide exactly with that of the other (politics to economic, circulation to production) even if the former is the “determinate effect” of the latter; and this is because the former also have their own internal “determinations.”

Stuart Hall in Hunt, *Class and Class Structure*, 1977, 48.

The “complex unity” that we are considering here draws together a land-based lifestyle, benefits and non-capitalist work within a household focussed economy. Based on this analysis I have located a unique micro-class position for alternative lifestyle participants in Nimbin and places like it. I have called this group the benefit peasantry.

There is a conflict between the mainstream and the alternative lifestyle participants over what constitutes work and it has been fought out over a long time. Not earning cash for labour meant that some people are described as “not working” when in fact they may have been working very hard. The following quote from the council-commissioned survey of attitudes of persons living on shared land brings the issue of defining work to the fore.

Definition of employment was another difficult area ... many people felt that building their own house, constructing their own energy sources and creating their own services on a small community and working towards self sufficiencies in their own food sources is full-time employment not yet recognised in the sense of traditionally paid work.

Barker & Knox, *Findings of a Survey of Attitudes of the Dwellers of Multiple Occupancies*, 1985, 13.

The alternative definition of work includes the subsistence domestic economy as work, rather than subscribing to a definition that sees only income-earning activity as work. The following quote from a locally produced guide to Nimbin touches on many important aspects of the alternative lifestyle with regards to work. First, it talks of ethical businesses and promotes Nimbin as a suitable place to set up, with the proviso

that the business be “deeply representative” of the concerns and lifestyles of the locals. Second, it presents the alternative movement as forging some kind of blueprint and “changing mass culture.” Third, it points to work being more than wage labour and the importance of other kinds of social activity. Fourth, it refers to patterns of unemployment and partial employment and the fact that “non-career work styles” are preferred. This includes co-operative, worker-controlled, home-based work. However it makes no mention of social security benefits potentially smoothing income and providing a base income for people doing these things.

Many people have become self-supporting in their own alternate world. Some have grown to create employment for others in co-operative work styles with flexible, worker controlled conditions of work, many businesses being home-based.

The region still has a higher than average level of unemployment [...] and seeks to attract further ethical business to set up here, ethical in both products and methods. It is important for their success that they be deeply representative of these concerns and lifestyles of locals. The early Aquarian settlers were attracted by the more relaxed country pace of life and practical country ways, with the emphasis on a simple, non-commercial quality of life. These things are still valued and we wish to continue them.

Residents have a wide variety of experience and skills and part-time, casual, non-career work styles are preferred. Family, social and cultural affairs are considered equally as important as work.

Nimbin & Environs, No. 2, 1993, 28.

This conflict over what constitutes work was further demonstrated in a social drama that I witnessed in the Nimbin Neighbourhood Centre during a “help clinic” in 1996, which shows that the issue is still not settled. A young man was extremely angry that his unemployment benefit had been cut off because he had answered, “Yes” to the question, “Have you worked in the last fortnight” on his income declaration form. It turned out he had been, as he put it, “working my fucking arse off planting trees to protect the environment,” but not working as a *wage* labourer. He had answered the question *politically* rather than within the definition used by the bureaucracy of paid employment. Further down the unemployment benefit form there is a place to enter income earned over the payment period of the benefit, and this of course had been recorded at “nil.” This example shows the political tension between unpaid work and paid work.

In addition to unpaid work, another of the “silences” in work is leisure. Under normal circumstances leisure is the privilege of the very rich. The amount of self-directed leisure time is an aspect of the alternative lifestyle that could not be afforded by people of their social class under ordinary circumstances. They can afford it by paring down their consumption levels, and by the lower costs of rural living. The fact that people have made a way of life out of being underemployed, and have been able to enjoy instead of just enduring it, seems to stimulate a backlash.

The moral criticism from the right wing (and even some working class critics) says it’s not “right” that people should be “paid to do nothing.” The fact is that under capitalism unemployment is a structural rather than a personal issue, and as Bill Metcalf commented, people have a legal entitlement to those benefits, regardless of where in Australia they live.

Chapter 6. Household Production

6.0 Introduction to household focussed activity

This chapter is about the domestic mode of production. In the case of the benefit peasantry, most of their economic activity takes place within the domestic domain and it is usually production for use within the household.

An analysis of the articulation of different modes of production shows how the gender-based division of labour is resisted, altered and accepted in different measure by those affected. Where a non-capitalist mode of production articulates with capitalism modifications must take place to the domestic expectations of the parties to achieve a viable outcome.

The history of capitalist countries shows how the nature of domestic activity is conditioned by the economic necessities of the time, regardless of the intentions of the participants. These economic imperatives are played out within a particular historical and social setting that allows the actors agency to *transform* the manner in which those demands are met, but not to *transcend* them.

In its present form, and particularly as practiced by the benefit peasantry, domestic production in Australia can be seen as distinct but subordinate *non*-capitalist (rather than *pre*-capitalist) production that takes place within the dominant capitalist economic formation.

Nimbin is unique in that we have a convergence of persons who have come from industrialised capitalist society and are now living within a mode of production that is subordinate to mainstream capital. The alternative lifestyle gives us an opportunity to examine household labour in terms of its articulation with the capitalist mode of production. It allows us to see how the mode of production imposes a logic of its own that is a greater force than any ideas held in the heads of the participants (ideas of an undifferentiated division of labour, for example).

With some notable exceptions, women in the alternative movement were seen to act in rather sex-stereotyped ways and act out more traditional roles than even straight women in the cities. I will attempt to explain why the alternatives have supposedly failed to meet the challenge to “create” a new domestic culture.

The separation between domestic and commodified production sharply divides the public and private spheres of work and home in modern capitalism. For non-capitalist socio-economic formations the separation between work and home is far less. Household production is a mode of production that has been subordinated to capitalism. This has certain implications for the analysis of household labour.

I want to show how the real economic and physical conditions of household production have a determining effect on how domestic life is practiced, regardless of the will (intention) of the alternative lifestyle participants (and their ideology). As Marx commented, people make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing. The economic conditions of domestic life determine that household practices are enacted that must meet perceived minimum needs. However, their ideology conditions the *manner* in which domestic production is practiced.

Marx pointed out that always and everywhere the ideas and institutions only grew up out of the actual practice of men. ... In every historical social group ... the relations between the members of the group depended on the form of production. Institutions [grow] ... out of what was customary in each group: institutions, laws, moral precepts and other ideas merely crystallised, as it were, out of customs, and the customs were directly associated with the form of production.

Burns, *Introduction to Marxism*, 1983, 13.

This is where the political economy of the alternative lifestyle needs to be explained in terms of their cultural inheritance. A traditional agrarian way of life wouldn't normally throw up the type of ideology that we see in Nimbin. The benefit peasant way of life is proof that the mode of production determines the way of life of a class only in the last instance, not in every particular. The superstructural (cultural) elements that arise from the same mode of production can vary widely, reflecting the complex interplay between cultural practices, values, and economics.

Who does domestic labour and how gendered roles are constructed are the result of the interaction between economic imperatives and the pre-existing cultural priorities of the people involved. I trace the construction of gendered roles in the alternative lifestyle through an analysis of housework. Starting with household work as a subordinate mode of production, I look at its articulations (economic, technological and ideological) with the capitalist production process. This is a complex task, as Hansen has noted.

[T]he different ideas that constitute domesticity suggest changing and potentially contradictory meanings about actors and agency, dependency and power, and about the home as both an enclosed space and a political economy. There is nothing simple about this interplay, taking place as it [does] against the changing backdrop of history, influenced by broad economic shifts and by social and cultural practices.

Hansen, *African Encounters With Domesticity*, 1992, 3.

The complex articulation of people, technology and economy in domestic labour can be demonstrated in case studies from developing countries. The technologically simple lifestyle of the alternative movement in Australia also brings to light some of the complexities of household labour, including the question of gendered labour. Their reversion to a low-tech, low income, rural way of life has re-imposed some aspects of traditional domesticity and a gender-based division of labour on women. Difficult physical environments (for instance, the lack of a service infrastructure) require a great deal more domestic labour than required in advanced capitalist urban areas. In these circumstances, there exists the requirement for a fulltime domestic worker, and when that labour is unwaged, the person who does domestic work is (usually) female.

It is “at home” that people live out their lives, and the domestic economy reflects their situation. People’s interests and ideology are shown in a clearer form than when those material interests and ideologies are refracted through the public sphere. In addition, there are unique aspects of the alternative lifestyle that require me to account for alternative forms of household-based work.

6.1 Alternatives and household production

Nimbin is unusual in that we see city people changing from a fully capitalist mode of production to a non-capitalist mode. Nimbin can be seen as a social laboratory that gives us an opportunity to re-examine aspects of the domestic labour debate. Their reversion



A great deal of the early work done by the alternative settlers was establishing food gardens. Water was often carried from the nearest source by bucket (in the absence of pumps and reticulated water) labour that made the task of keeping the gardens productive a lot more onerous. Picture from the cover of the 1998 Visions of Nimbin fund-raising calendar.

to peasant-style production (that is, a form of non-commercial land-based living) gives us an opportunity to look at gendered labour and to question how much of the division of work between men and women is based on ideology and how much on the logic of actual material needs.

A thorough analysis of the domestic domain is important because so much of the migrants' productive activity is household-oriented. The early stages of alternative settlement involved creating a domestic infrastructure – for example,

housing, plumbing, electricity, access roads and bridges, gardens and orchards, and domestic animal production (for eggs, milk, fibre and sometimes meat). For many migrants, this early period of settlement required a hand-to-mouth kind of subsistence, in many ways similar to conditions of the early pioneering days. Their mode of production, with labour-intensive domestic and agricultural work, was a consequence of rural life with limited financial and technological resources. Those material circumstances can lead to a perception of reversions in the division of labour.

[G]ender differentiation is clearly marked within the alternative lifestyle movement in Australia. Sex, or gender roles are clear, separate and distinct, still follow in the main what might be considered “traditional” role models, and show no evidence of blurring or changing over time into non-gender-specific roles. Within alternative lifestyles gender differentiation is clear, with women tending to maintain what

could be considered the traditional female attributes of motherhood, passivity, expressiveness and emotionality, and men maintaining the more public and instrumental spheres (Edwards, 1983:399).

Metcalf, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986, Section 7.2, 128-9.

It seems to me that many alternative lifestyle women make a virtue of necessity – following the course of least resistance and in the absence of any real (economic) alternative short of leaving either the relationship or the lifestyle. The division of labour which arose in the early period of alternative settlement was often the best use of available resources and skills, taken together with the problems that had to be resolved (building homes, making gardens, raising children, and so on).

Women doing hard physical work

For other alternative women who came from pro-feminist political backgrounds and live on different communities with progressive ideologies (like some of hamlets at the Tuntable Falls community) other choices could be validated. Julie Baigent, for example, built her own house.

Voice-over: This stone cottage was built by Julie Baigent, an artist. As is the custom in these parts she built it with her own hands. Because new settlers generally have little money, there's much innovation, recycling and use of on-the-spot natural materials. Julie's house cost the grand sum of \$1500.

Julie: Well, Tuntable creek is down the bottom of this 200-foot cliff, and I'd spend mornings collecting the stone out of the creek, throwing them up onto the bank, and then wheel-barrowing them across to the flying fox, and then they'd all come up on the flying fox ... There was probably about 70 tons of material. And then I'd spend the rest of the day just doing some cementing, I'd mix up the cement by hand, there's probably over a thousand batches of cement. And with the stone ... well, I bought a book in the beginning about stone masonry, that explained a lot, and as I went along I learnt, but although it was physically hard work, it was very easy, easy to understand and I didn't have many problems at all.

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

The point to note here is that women can, and do, undertake hard physical work, and particularly when they are freed from childcare duties. On one community that Jan

Tilden visited she found that the women organised the building site so they could work there with their children, an inspired compromise.¹³⁵

Fewer machines, more work

As I have said, a great deal more domestic labour is necessary in order to simply survive in a low technology environment. Alternative domesticity and the various ideological accommodations that have arisen show how much difference a developed infrastructure, money and technology make to the amount of time people spend engaged in domestic labour compared with how they would otherwise spend their time in the city. In the interview quoted below, Jan Tilden gives an example of how the change over to machines from low-tech farming (hand-tools) left the people on one community with more free time to get involved in wider community issues.

We had all hand tools [in the beginning]. It was all cutting grass with scythes and sickles and generally sawing all the wood by hand. So we've just recently started going into machines, and I think as we've been doing more other things, we've also been doing lots more conservation work.

Tilden, *Women in Intentional Communities*, 1991, 327.

On average, the alternative lifestyle participants do tend to have a much lower *material* standard of living than the urban proletariat. The lower material standard of living can be demonstrated by the lack of basic household appliances such as refrigerators and televisions, very basic plumbing and electricity (often lighting by generator or some means other than being hooked into the mains) in many households. This reflects both low income and spending priorities, but is traded off against greater personal space in terms of habitat, more autonomy, and a beautiful natural environment.

Features such as mains electricity, reticulated water supply, flush toilets and even walls – things which are taken for granted as bare necessities in middle-class lives – are often done without for long periods of time while householders accumulate the money and/or technical know-how to provide these things themselves. ... The highest standard of material living attained by members of communities is still well

¹³⁵ Tilden, *Women in Intentional Communities* 1991, 323.

below what is common in the mainstream. There are two related reasons for this. The first is a lack of borrowing power. Even those community members who have professional employment usually only work part-time or casually. ... The other reason is voluntary simplicity – the choice to lead life with a minimum standard of material comfort for various ideological reasons.

Tilden, *Women in Intentional Communities*, 1991, 199.

It is important to also keep in mind that the mode of production does impose certain restrictions on how you live. The necessary labour time to achieve each domestic task in a non-capitalised, low technology environment is prolonged because it is done manually.



This photograph shows my friend Micky packing away groceries after we had gone shopping. Everything had to be transferred to rodent-proof containers. Fruit and vegetables were stored in a chilly-bin because Micky had no fridge.

We had stopped for a cup of tea before doing this and in the 15 or so minutes we had taken to drink it, little marsupial mice had eaten through the plastic bags containing dried foodstuffs and had nibbled holes in the bananas.

Water for the tea was carried from a rainwater tank outside, and heated on a gas ring. Dishes were washed in a bowl on the bench.

Since this photograph was taken Micky's house has burned down. Fortunately nobody was hurt.

Photo: Sam Murray.

It is possible to compare the low level of ownership of even basic domestic appliances (the domestic means of production) to mainstream Australia in the 1950s. With 1950s domestic technology they could be expected to be years behind in terms of breaking down sex-role differentiation compared to city people. While the alternative domesticity is a *re-working* of a 1950s model it has significant differences from it.

However, the so-called reversion can be seen as a case of “what is needed at the time.” I think that much of the sex-role reversion reported in studies (the research for which was mostly conducted in the 1980s when the main migrant group would have had small children) reflected a phase in the life cycle of the developing alternative culture and, of course did not

apply to all alternative women in Nimbin.¹³⁰ As the *Nimbin Centenary* book points out –

[T]his was a generation that had reached child-producing age – in fact, in Nimbin, the rate of child production was among the highest birth-rates anywhere in Australia in the late 1970's.

Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982, 1982, 134.

The most retrogressive phase persisted in its most extreme form only so long as there were small children afoot (and in particular breast-fed children) and in the absence of the social infrastructure that is now in place. While there are still alternative lifestyle participants migrating to Nimbin to settle, they are no longer “pioneers.” They migrate to a place where there already exists a critical mass of infrastructure and community. New migrants don’t need to be constantly inventing and improvising to provide the most basic of services for themselves. The necessary material requirements have been coupled with elements of the alternative lifestyle culture, creating a new model (along with a supporting ideology) of low-income rural life.



Likewise, factors such as how far it is to the nearest town, the availability of reliable transport, childcare, and paid employment, all impact on what choices are realistically available. They determine which aspects of

domestic labour are voluntary and which are not. In the (effective) absence of these “services” you must provide your own. This self-provisioning – making bread for example, especially if you have to also chop wood and keep the wood-stove going in order to cook it, can be time consuming.

Many of the things that the early alternative lifestyle migrants had to provide for themselves are now available as commodities and services, sometimes provided by the

¹³⁰ For example see Metcalf, *Gender Differentiation Within Alternative Lifestyle Groups*, 1984; Metcalf, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986; Tilden, *Women in Intentional Communities*, 1991 (the research for which was done in 1984-6).

earlier alternative migrants. There is a network of support and practitioners of all kinds – alternative energy technology, housing, support for people having babies, alternative health providers, ready-made vegetarian foodstuffs, a laundrette, recycling depots, education facilities and rainforest plant nurseries.

6.2 The logic of production & ideological renegotiations

In terms of self-sufficiency, accommodations have been made, conditioned by the logic of the rural lifestyle. For example, where the colonial settlers made their own clothes, it is far more expedient for the alternative lifestyle participants to buy clothing from a second-hand store. It is less work overall to buy milk rather than care for a milch cow. Rather than “selling out,” as suggested by some critics, this should be seen as an intelligent adaptation to real economic situations.

On rural properties there is a need to feed the animals before dark and wood must be cut and brought inside for the fire (sometimes needed for cooking as well as warmth and hot water) while it is still light outside. In capitalist production “industrial time” is an important part of the relations of production. For rural producers, other factors like “nature” impinge more strongly than time. I will examine these factors next.

Given that domestic labour in alternative households doesn’t always appear to have the same oppressive qualities about it that urban-straight households suffer, perhaps the challenge to the mainstream model has taken place in the *quality* of domestic labour, rather than in the division of labour itself. Domestic work in alternative society has more of a voluntary nature about it, as opposed to the more compulsory nature of housework in urban-straight society, perhaps caused by the economic and social dependency of “housewives” in cities and the time-driven nature of that domestic work?

When I first came here to Nimbin and there was the challenge of building a house, growing food, having babies, and the slushy track you had to walk through for a kilometre just to get home, chopping wood every night, candles, no power, no hot water, living in a tent for two years while ... while me and my ex-husband built a house—all that sort of stuff, I just loved it. [Gillian]

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

When I talk of the more voluntary character of domestic labour I am talking in Engels' terms of voluntary in the sense of being freely chosen. Engels famously argued, "freedom is the conscious recognition of necessity." The knowledge that the animals need to be fed before dark, or that wood must be cut for the fire, has an immediacy for the domestic worker that is a far cry from activity controlled by orders from an employer.

Further, the effects (outcomes) of those activities are not mediated through a wage-packet. If you cut wood for the fire, you get to wash, eat and stay warm as a result of those activities. In straight households, some other forms of domestic labour (for example, ironing work clothes) are undertaken to reproduce labour power and are undertaken to match the requirements (appearance standards) necessary for the sale of that labour power to employer. This domestic work is mediated through the wage paid to that worker, and lacks the voluntary and self-directed nature of work done on your own account. So while domestic labour is necessary for alternative lifestyle participants it is not compulsory, because it is directed to the satisfaction of household needs rather than external needs. It is in that sense the domestic labour can be considered to be undertaken voluntarily, not in the sense of whether or not you do any is voluntary.

There is also the real option to return to straight society and this can lessen the sense of oppression. The "freedom" to leave suggests that this work is unalienated labour, or at least less alienated than other kinds of work. Jan Tilden makes this point when she talks about people choosing to remain.

In considering women in intentional communities, then, one is not looking at a category of people who happen to be examinable in a category of circumstances, but rather a group of individuals who have *chosen*, at some historical moment in the action which constitutes their lives, to live in and develop a particular social situation. They continually choose to remain in that situation as it changes in response to their actions and those of others.

Tilden, *Women in Intentional Communities*, 1991, xiii.

Overall, the alternative lifestyle participants are less subject to external pressures of urban work, collecting children from child-care or school, having dinner on the table at a particular time and getting prepared for the next day at work.

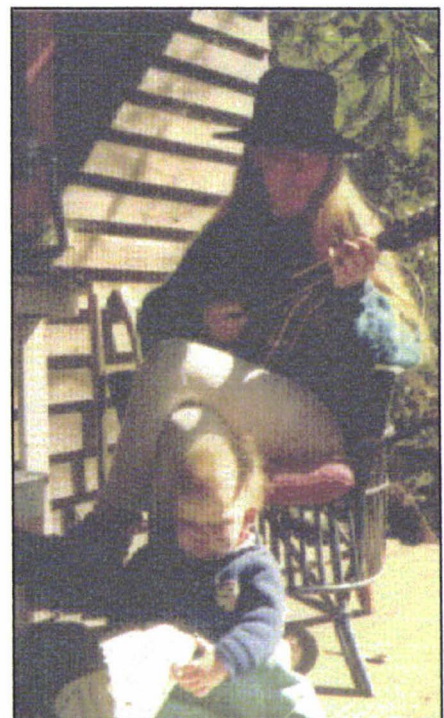
The time spent on domestic labour by the alternative lifestyle participants is not highly valued (in the conventional economic sense of well-paid). The cash-value of the labour power of those domestic workers is not evaluated, so it “doesn’t matter” if it takes all day to do the washing. It is usually not until capitalism impacts upon their domestic life (most commonly through a nine-to-five job) that there are high demands for household improvements. At that point those improvements not only become affordable, they are also necessary because time has become a commodity.

In a social order dominated by capitalist production even the non-capitalist producer is gripped by capitalist conceptions. Balzac [shows] how a petty peasant performs many small tasks gratuitously for his usurer, whose goodwill he is eager to retain, and how he fancies that he does not give the latter something for nothing because his own labour does not cost him any cash outlay.

Marx, *Capital*, Volume III, 1978, 39.

As in any kind of production, mechanisation of domestic labour (the investment of capital in the production process) saves time. When the time of alternative lifestyle participants becomes more highly valued then you can expect to see an increase in the amount of timesaving domestic appliances.

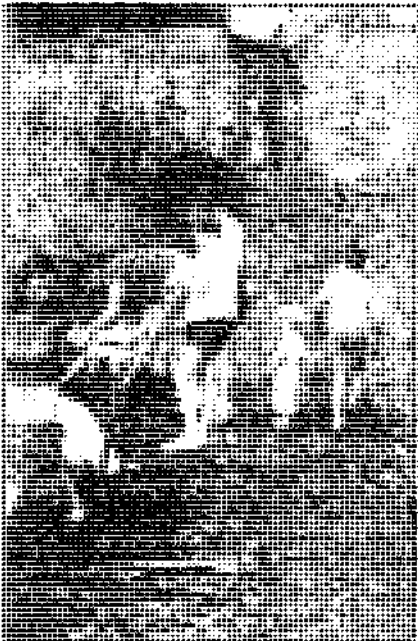
Examples of the increase in the value of time can be seen with any increase of external involvement, such as an increase in the amount of political work that the household is engaged in, not just waged-labour.



This picture sums up the great attraction of parenting in Nimbin: a simple life, with time to sit in the sun and play music. For working parents in the city, life is often a series of rushed journeys in snarled traffic from work places to childcare centres and schools after a hard day at work. Picture from the cover of the 1998 Visions of Nimbin fund-raising calendar.

History shows that there is a continuum between paid and unpaid domestic work and the availability of labour. Where there is a surplus of available wage labour, coupled to cultural rules, it is possible to find men doing what is typically “women’s work” in another culture. Conversely, if there is a major shortage of labour power, women can be found doing really arduous, dirty, physical work such as road building, heavy industrial manufacture, and coal mining.

As in more typical peasant economies, benefit peasants’ production is primarily household-centred and, like other peasants, they tend not to be primarily engaged in capitalist production for profit. Rather they aim to produce subsistence amounts and will sell off any surplus.¹⁵⁷ Those engaged in handicraft production do so on a small scale, and it is unlikely that they will ever become manufacturers (in the capitalist sense) simply because they don’t have access to investment money.



Road maintenance work on access to a shared property. Note that the work is being done by hand, and that children are involved in this activity. Picture from the cover of 1998 Visions of Nimbin fund-raising calendar.

The ideological support for the division of labour

The notion that the material world wins through can also be demonstrated in the gendered division of labour. It “determines in the last instance” by material facts forcing their way through into people’s behaviour through a social realm. It’s not that economics wins through *over* ideology and despite ideology, but that it conditions ideology: it wins through by virtue of ideological and social processes. Those material conflicts become evident within an ideological structure.

¹⁵⁷ Market days are a traditional articulation of domestic handicraft and food production with commodity markets, and here we can see small-scale handicraft production and commodities for sale that are an extension of domestic production. See TOURISM: Artisans, page 279.

[A] distinction should be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. [C]onsciousness must be explained [...] from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production.

Marx, *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1977, Marx & Engels Selected Works Volume 1, 504.

There are a lot of “equal but different” ideas and anti-feminist sentiments expressed by members of the alternative community. The big difference with traditional anti-feminist ideology is that the alternative population espouse a *pro-woman* philosophy far more. This informs the attitudes that they have which treat anything they do *particularly* as women as elements of their power.

The women in this area have an amazing collective nurturing and ... I find that it's really beautiful to experience that, and it's coming, a lot of it's coming through the women and the children. And I think that we should be looking at them, sort of following their [way] ... you know.

Sensitive New Age Guise, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

I will show that the *ideologies* surrounding domestic labour and those who do it are dependent on the economic imperatives of the time. It is usually in the interests of both themselves as individuals, and their households, that women do domestic work *and* have an ideology that makes mothering a worthwhile and valued thing to do.

Many researchers report alternative women as having a negative idea about feminist ideologies. Some versions of feminism would define a male partner in these circumstances (particularly during the house-bound “bare-foot and pregnant stage”) as an oppressor and exploiter. For women who do want to establish an alternative lifestyle, this analysis is not helpful. These co-operative relationships are a requirement of the domestic mode of production and in this context domestic “harmony” is a relation of domestic production.

We'd come to Nimbin for peace and happiness and harmony in our lives. And the way that we divided the labour in those early days of building our homes and establishing our gardens was really directed towards peace and harmony. The difficulties that would have ensued from doing it the other way around, having the women out trying to build the house and the men inside looking after the kids, there would not have been a harmonious situation. This didn't in any way allay the deep suspicion of the city feminists that we'd just fallen for the old line, and you know, that we were really not creating any sort of alternative at all. But from our point of view it was a more harmonious way of living our lives. I think, I can't speak for all my sisters in that regard, but certainly for me it didn't feel too bad, and I did have a go at clearing a site and starting to build something and within a very short space of time I was weeping over the mattock, just feeling totally incompetent.

Aquarius Revisited: Under The Rainbow - A Social Experiment, That's History Programme, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1993.

In general there was a fair amount of anti-feminist feeling among community members of both sexes. ... This criticism usually centred around the idea that feminists were women who exhibited devalued "masculine" traits such as competitiveness and aggressiveness.

Ticken. *Women in Intentional Communities*, 1991, 280.

This means that a legitimating ideology, which promotes nurturing and motherhood and even passivity, would actually be part of a (generally successful) adaptation to the *real* circumstances they found themselves in. A more "feminine" role was also, perhaps, a reflection of the philosophies of some of the persons who self-selected for migration to the area. Sitting back and criticising the alternative movement for failing to provide a new model for the rest of capitalist society somehow suggests that they had more control over world affairs and the general economic environment in which they found themselves than they could possibly have had in reality.

The re-imposition in the alternative lifestyle of a strongly gender-based division of labour gives us an important confirmation of the material basis of the division of labour. It is more than just men being "sexist" and an ideology of women being "better at housework" or being less good at other kinds of work. It also shows that, by contrast, urban living can create the (technological) conditions for women to spend fewer hours

in domestic work and for that work to be more evenly spread between men and women.¹³⁸ As Tilden notes,

Particular problems for those who had tried to alter the division of labour between the sexes were hard physical work and child-raising.

Tilden, *Women in Intentional Communities*, 1991, 277-8.

It is not simply a case of “bad men” imposing a sexist division of labour, or of “naïve” or “brain-washed” women submitting to the status quo. Like other aspects of human endeavour, it is a case of people doing the best they can with the resources that they have. As John Seed commented, they had come to the land with one idea of how they would live, and their real material lives took a different turn.

We started building houses in the order of the pregnancies. ... We had thought that we were going to settle down on this piece of land and be care-takers for the meditation centre and spend the rest of our lives meditating. And then all of a sudden it was building and babies and ... you know, nothing ever quite settled down again after that. [John Seed.]

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

Things that are luxuries in one lifestyle are absolute necessities in another. The concern (alternatives sometimes call it an “obsession”) with privacy and cleanliness of straight people is such example. What constitutes an acceptable level of privacy and cleanliness is another negotiated social value.

You have to make a choice about what is realistically achievable with the resources you have available. You find that you can do without many of the things that you bought when you lived in the city, you can survive without meat every day, and clothes really don't have to be washed just because you've worn them once, you can clean them when they are soiled.

Interview with Ethyl, May 1998.

¹³⁸ Urbanisation is an excellent predictor of domestic labour equality and Australia is number one in the world on both indices.

The point that the material realm conditions and determines the social, which then conditions and determines individual choices, is clear. What is not so clear is that the mediation process is still necessary. It's not just that the economic determines the social but that the material has to determine the individuals' choice *through* the social. The social realm also plays a necessary role in the structure. That mediation is built into it and is required, and is a definite part of the phenomena, not just a super-structure in which the economic forces its way through and nothing much happens. The economic forces its way through by virtue of the superstructure: the operations that take place within the social realm are necessary to the construction of the material and economic realms.

6.2.1 Gendered division of labour – Case study

The following example is taken from Jan Tilden's thesis, *Women in Intentional Communities*, and looks at the question of who will dig latrine pits. It raises a number of difficult and subtle questions and repays patient analysis.

In situations where discomfort had arisen over gender based work roles, an "equal but different" approach had been adopted. Again it was communal tasks involving hard physical work that had brought this issue to the fore:

"Digging the toilet holes used to be the big thing with me. I used to hate digging the toilets. I just couldn't stand it. I wasn't strong enough to do it because the ground is very hard and it took me a long time. So I came to the conclusion that men and women have just got different strengths and I could contribute in another way."

It is clear from the last quote that Nickie wanted to avoid making the toilets because she felt that she *could not* do it, whereas Phil [her partner] avoided housework because he *preferred not to* do it. One might question whether there really was freedom of choice for Nickie in this situation.

Tilden, *Women in Intentional Communities*, 1991, 305.

Tilden contrasts Nickie's *feeling* that she could not dig toilets with Phil's *preference* not to do housework artificially. By stressing Phil's "preferred" and Nickie's "could not," Tilden implied that the choice of who should dig pit latrines was materially determined rather than determined by ideological and social notions of what is appropriate or

reasonable for women to do. By contrast, she implies that Phil's avoidance of housework was ideologically rather than materially driven.

Nickie, in the course of her explanation for why she didn't dig latrines, mentioned that she *had* dug them. She said, "I used to hate digging the toilets. I just couldn't stand it. I wasn't strong enough to do it because the ground is very hard and *it took me a long time*." Since she had done this work, she *could* do this work, and therefore she too *preferred* not to do this work. This ruled out the strong form of her argument (which was that she *could not*) and what was left was a justification of why she *should not* have to do so.

However, the social decision between Nickie and Phil about who should do what does not live in an abstract social realm but lives in an area of social life which is very closely connected with the underlying material reality. There were sound material reasons that underlay the *social decision* that she should not dig the toilet.

The social dimension of the gendered division of labour between them is lost because it is too closely connected with the underlying material reality. Nickie's hatred (a subjective social phenomenon) of digging is very closely linked with the underlying material fact of her difficulties undertaking this labour.

Tilden suggests that Phil had a *choice* that was unavailable to Nickie, and that by being weaker she was obliged to cook and clean. A materialist analysis accepts that there was not freedom of choice in the situation for Nickie. However, what it does argue is that the choice of whether Nickie dug the toilets was not a *material* choice determined by whether or not she could dig toilets as has been suggested, but is in fact a *socially determined* choice in which notions of fairness and appropriateness come into play to decide whether a particular person should dig the toilets or clean. The division of labour is not naturally or directly determined by whether a person can cook or clean or dig, because there is no doubt that Phil could do housework and Nickie could dig.

Tilden misses the distinction between material and social determination because, while she can see that Nickie's choice not to do the toilets is determined, she mis-perceives it

as materially determined. In fact, Nickie's choice not to do the toilets is determined only through a social mediation. At a material level she can do the toilets, but it is at a social level that the question of whether she will dig the toilets is actually settled.

The key link in the chain of phenomena that we've been dealing with regarding toilet digging and cleaning is the mediated determination by material life. It's true that Nickie hated digging latrines for sound reasons but that is not necessarily any different from the sound reasons that Phil might have had for hating to clean.

Hence the division of labour benefited them both materially and is not a *different* choice for Nickie from what it was for Phil in the way that Tilden argues. This is a critique of Tilden's work because she wanted to see a freedom for men that was not available to women. Because Tilden identified with the woman in this context, she was unable to see how awful cleaning is for Phil, and was only able to see the unpleasantness of toilet digging. Certainly the distinction between "preferring" not to and "feeling" you could not (although you factually could) is not as clear as Tilden suggests.

A material approach allows you to see that there are good reasons for the gendered division of labour between Nickie and Phil. Those decisions are not simply and narrowly determined by the questions of gender, but are always resolved at a social level. Objective material circumstances are evaluated and compared in the sense that at the social level Nickie hates digging toilets and Phil hates cleaning. Although it could be argued that Phil should not find cleaning difficult, the facts are that he *does*. Similarly Nickie might have been a lot stronger if she had done more physical work and strength had been actively encouraged in her from a young age by her parents.

There is also the question of whether Phil's inability to clean is rather bogus, because cleaning is not that hard. Phil's dislike for it could be seen as petty and covering up a kind of laziness, a slovenly lack of interest perhaps. It seems to me that, while this might be true, it doesn't detract from Phil's real dislike of cleaning. His willingness to undertake the labour that other people hate – in order to avoid the more frequent but less onerous task of housework – shows that subjectively he finds housework unpleasant. This is independent of whether he *ought* to do so, or whether his dislike of cleaning is a

product of his upbringing for example. The fact that Phil is now the person that he is, and that he is willing to undertake the undeniably difficult and dirty work that other people don't want to do in order that he can be excused cleaning duties, proves that his dislike of housework is truly felt rather than a way of avoiding or shirking work.

Adopting a materialist perspective you can see the connections between Nickie's weakness, her hatred of digging toilets, and the division of labour between her and Phil. It allows you to see not just all those connections, but that those connections form a mediated triad in which first, the material fact of Nickie's relative weakness is relevant, and then that material fact is reflected in the social realm in her hatred for doing this work, and finally leads to a division of labour, a social agreement in which she voluntarily accepts the pre-existing gendered division of labour that has her doing housework and Phil doing heavy work outside.

Wrong question, wrong conclusion

The question of whether or not Nickie's choice was free or determined was not the right question. The real question is whether or not the decisions are *materially* determined or determined *via* a form of social mediation. If Nickie had been unable to dig toilets, that would have implied a division of labour between Nickie and Phil that was not socially mediated – the determination would have been a material determination in the way that her role as a mother is. The gendered division of pregnancy labour is not socially mediated (but is instead directly materially determined) because men cannot (yet) bear children. By contrast, the gendered division of domestic labour is of a different kind, and that is precisely the distinction that Tilden is unable to see because of her view of the two distinct kinds of choices that she saw the persons making – free choice versus non-free, determined choices – a view that flows from a liberal ideology. If you take a materialist perspective all choices are “freely” taken but the circumstances are still determinant in the long run.

Because Nickie's choice is justified and necessary, Tilden mis-apprehends this as a material determination, not as a socially mediated choice. Subsequently, Tilden fails to see how “necessary” it is for Phil not to clean, and she wrongly sees Phil's socially

mediated determination (as a non-cleaner) as a “free choice” rather than a determined one. The fact that Phil is objectively not such a good cleaner and hates it doesn’t add up to determination for Tilden in the same way that Nickie’s hatred of toilet digging and her relative inability to dig toilets (in comparison to Phil) determines her status as a non-toilet digger. Tilden’s inability to perceive the two things as being the same – and what the real distinction is between Nickie’s “inability” to dig toilets and Phil’s “choice” not to clean – is because she’s focussed on the dichotomy of freedom and determination. In contrast I argue that all choices are “freely” undertaken within a defining context: they are choices made from within a restricted range, conditioned by a determining environment.

If Nickie had been the only adult on the property, there is no question that Nickie would have dug the toilet holes. Conversely, if Phil were at home without an adult female, then he would be found cleaning, perhaps not as well or as frequently as Nickie, but he would in fact perform this kind of domestic labour.

The division of labour has to be made at a social level, even though that social level embodies or enacts decisions or facts that can be seen as economic or material facts. It is true Nickie is relatively weak and she hates digging because it involves muscle strength that she doesn’t have enough of. That means her hatred of digging toilets is a case of the material realm (her weakness) winning through over the social realm (her expressed hatred). The fact that she is weaker doesn’t *in itself* let her off digging toilets. It is only through her expressed hatred of digging and Phil’s expressed hatred of cleaning that it becomes possible (through social mediation) for a gendered division of labour to be negotiated.

It is within the social realm that Nickie and Phil react emotionally to their work processes (in which they exchange between themselves what their reactions are to their work), and it is in the social realm that it becomes possible for them to work out a gendered division of labour (which is another material fact). The determination between Nickie’s weakness and the division of labour (which can be seen as determined all the way) has to be mediated through a social realm. That is precisely the point at issue: whether or not that determination takes place directly (as for example on the question of

pregnancy work, which Nickie could undertake and Phil could not) or whether it has to take place via social mediation.

The gendered division of labour between Nickie and Phil (a material fact) could not be determined by other material facts (Nickie's weakness, Phil's inability to clean) *other* than by mediation through a social realm. If that social realm were not there, then those two material facts (which are related causally) would not be so related. In this case the material determines the material *via* the social realm.

This case study demonstrates the way that I see the highly gendered division of domestic labour among the alternative lifestyle participants as being determined by their low level of domestic technology (and capitalisation). The gender roles had to be constructed within the social realm, but the material facts dictated that they would be so constructed.

6.3 Children as production

In this section I will explore domestic labour in relation to the reproduction of high-value labour power, and the cheapness of its production on account of it happening under a subordinate mode of production. The skilled and educated workers necessary for capitalism are (so far) most cheaply produced using partly paid or unpaid domestic labour. While the household-based *re*-production of children is production, it is not capitalist production.

Although there is a social prohibition on looking at having children as "production" it is, in fact, just that. The taboo on seeing (and speaking of) reproduction as production is one of the ideological processes that allows domestic production and commodity production to articulate.

In Nimbin, the "production" of children is a significant "industry." It is a subordinate mode of production that is required by capitalism because childcare has not been capitalised. In this way the surplus labour of people doing domestic work is appropriated by the capitalist class. Unlike the technological revolution that has come to bear on other

features of domestic labour, it has been impossible to mechanise childcare. Even with longer hours in school, those hours don't match the hours of work for most proletarians.

The alternative community straddles a contradiction in which the alternative culture critiques the impact of humans on the planet earth and the imminent environmental catastrophe of over-population and at the same time has a higher than average birth rate for their social class.

If I'm going to bring up a future person, it doesn't matter where it is. if I'm going to put one more person on this already over-crowded planet it's going to have to be a dynamite person. So I'm going to have to do just the best that I can out of it, because there is no way I'm going put another air-breathing, food-consuming person on this planet unless they're really going to make it worth their while and everybody else's.

Sensitive New Age Guse, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

A materialist explanation for this anomaly must be found that unites two apparently contradictory ideologies with the economic imperative that drives it. Families are guaranteed state support without the burden of constantly proving entitlement.

The child-rearing industry is not unique to Nimbin, but it does tend to have particular characteristics and is arguably an industry subsidised by the state. Single-parent child rearing is cost and labour-efficient in places like Nimbin. Overall the cost of living is less and the environment is pleasant. The alternative culture makes a virtue of low material expectations and gives the alternatives the social resources to survive reasonably comfortably on a low income.

Secondly, and more significantly, is the attraction of sole parents to the area generally, and particularly to the organised communities. In the early period of alternative settlement there was no unemployment benefit. "Only single mums and pensioners had an income, so it was necessary to share just to live."¹³⁹ These intentional communities

¹³⁹ Gloria Constine talking about life on the Tuntable Falls Co-operative Community, in Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality*, 1995, 80.

offer more economic and social support for bringing up children and are often a very attractive option for sole parents, so you could expect them to be somewhat over-represented in these survey results even in comparison to the large alternative lifestyle population in general. In this case, their “bread-winning” activity is inhabitation. Having a child represents a guaranteed income for which they can be paid by the state.

[Multiple Occupancy] zoning has given security and mortgage free housing to at least 200 families in the Lismore local government area alone. In particular they have been a boon for single parents. In the early days it was possible to buy into an MO and build a humble home on the dole or the supporting mother’s pension.

Dunstan, *Images from the Edge*, Position Paper. 1994, 6.

The alternative lifestyle produces high “quality” workers for the capitalist mill at bargain-basement prices. And it is these potential workers that can either be absorbed into the specialist rural industries that develop in places like Nimbin, or be exploited by the core capitalist complex. Better yet, highly educated workers coming out of the Nimbin region tend to be flexible workers and not averse to periodic lay-offs.

The workforce being reared by the alternative lifestyle community is being drawn off into the city. The higher than average educational background of the alternative lifestyle participants is transferred to their children and they produce valuable workers at a low cost to capital. If they are seen as a “product,” the children of the alternative lifestyle are sources of high-quality, “value-added” commodities to their eventual users. Their labour power is manufactured at a very low cost (and a cost that is shared by all taxpayers).

Children change base-lines

Having children changed what was the minimum acceptable living standard. This was one of the primary forces in the evolution of the alternative domestic lifestyle.

Conditions that an adult can and will endure are often not appropriate for children and the limited resources at their disposal mean less than optimal (and sometimes reactionary) responses arose.

I found the women at that [early settlement] stage very mercenary. I think they felt the shock of the withdrawal of life-support systems much more than what the men

did. It was Boys-town and they could run around the bush with machetes and so on, and that was alright, but women with children were in a much much more vulnerable position. They wanted houses. They played all sorts of sexual politics to get them. I mean, that was the only tactic they had. They were suffering badly. From exposure, from malnutrition, disease, and their children were suffering as well. ... [T]hat's what the successful men on the place did. ... Provide ... shelter. Provide cars. That was the social contract. It was fair enough too, it was what was needed. [Kali.]

Sensitive New Age Guise, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.¹⁴⁰

After the birth of children some domestic work becomes compulsory. You can't (realistically) choose not to feed or change a baby, and if clean nappies require that you wash them in the creek in the middle of winter and string them across your living space to dry them, then that is what you have to do.

"[I was] feeling really the lowest of the low—the pregnant housewife, just a drudge ... carting water, boiling it up to wash nappies, carting it around to tip it out and so and so on. But that is just this sort of lifestyle for women."

Tilden, *Women in Intentional Communities*, 1991, 278 & 284.

Women became active in strategising for more domestic services when the difficulties started to get them down and their children fell sick, while they were living in unfinished houses and the washing was still being done in the creek.

Child birth and child-rearing practices

Australia had one of the highest rates of obstetric intervention in the world at the time of the peak childbearing phase of the alternative settlement in Nimbin. This was in contradiction to the alternative lifestyle beliefs in autonomy and of "meaningful" birth experiences for parents and child. The alternative lifestyle practitioners have re-defined childbirth as a natural process, rather than an illness. They have fought for the right of

¹⁴⁰ Although this sounds far-fetched, it is supported by Jan Tilden. "I was also told that the men here [in South Village] were building houses to attract women." Tilden, *Women in Intentional Communities*, 1991, 180.

the fathers and support people to be present at the birth and they pioneered home birthing in Australia.

[T]he attention of the baby-makers was inevitably drawn to the quality of the conventional birth process as it was done in hospitals at the time. ... "Birth and Beyond" arose out of a need for support, for those parents who were choosing fully to experience the birth of their child, in their own home. It was a group committed to the principle of "Responsible Homebirth" ...

Nimbin Centenary 1882-1982, 1982, 134.

The Birth and Beyond organisation in Nimbin promotes the needs and interests of parents and children regarding childbirth and child rearing. It is community run and survives on donations and fundraising. It supports informed choice about child-birth (either home or hospital birth) and the services it offers include healthcare, pre-natal yoga and childbirth preparation classes, a book and video library, pools for water-births, car-pods (capsules) and car-seats, and a supply of baby clothes. The very existence of this group is an enactment of "the personal is political" philosophy of the alternative lifestyle ideology.

In September 1992 supporters of home births and lay midwifery took to the street in Nimbin to protest at the interference of the state in the medicalisation of birth and the outlawing of lay midwifery. The group, organised by Birth and Beyond, then planned to travel to Sydney and rally outside the Nurses Registration Board.

The law (Nurses Act '91) decrees that a woman can only choose the medical health care system when giving birth; her right to choose any alternative health care has been denied. Birth is not a medical event, it is a natural part of life. Lay midwives allow the woman to be in charge of how, where and in whose company the birth takes place.

"Rally to legalise lay midwifery," *Nimbin News*, November-December 1992, 23.

It is an outrageous infringement on our fundamental right to choose; accessibility to highly skilled and valued, traditionally trained midwives has been restricted by uninformed government legislation.

Nimbin & Environs, 1993, No. 2, 1993, 29.

The reclamation of the birth process has been one of the political successes of the alternative lifestyle community (of the women in particular) and was one of the cultural challenges to the mainstream culture. The success of the new model was publicised with the documentary, *Birth and Beyond – The Birth of Willow Raintree*, by local filmmakers Jeni Kendell and Paul Tait of Gaia Films. It was shown at the Australian National Conference of Midwives in 1979, where it received a standing ovation and it was screened widely both in Australia and overseas.¹⁴¹



A water birth at home with friends and family present is markedly different from the high-intervention, medicalised hospital births available at the time that *Birth and Beyond* was established. Photo: Brian Alexander, *Some Children of the Dream* collection.

These ideas were a major challenge to the existing way of looking at birth, when we see that in Australia only a few years earlier that planned home-births were considered offensive.

¹⁴¹ *Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982, 1982, 138.*

My son was born on the second day of the festival and my wife and I were both pretty young at that time, pretty unsure about doing a home-birth by ourselves.¹⁴² We tried to get a doctor or a midwife at that time to attend the birth but found it very difficult so went to the *Northern Star* and advertised for a doctor or a midwife and at that stage they wouldn't accept the ad because it was considered to be an obscene ad.

Aquarius Revisited: Under The Rainbow – A Social Experiment, That's History Programme, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1993. [Emphasis mine.]

Not only was childbirth reclaimed as a natural process, but breast-feeding was too – and this included the right to breast-feed in public. Breast-feeding has positive economic and social consequences – it is the safest and cheapest way of feeding babies in a low-cash economy with little in the way of sanitation (sewerage, safe water supplies and so on). The *time* to breast-feed and all the positive consequences of doing so were seen as a virtue of the lifestyle. In the early days families were without a well-developed social and domestic infrastructure to support them and having children came at the cost of tying many women to the home, at least temporarily.



Alternative schooling

Alternative parents tend to stress the importance of school as a place of learning rather than as part of an authority structure. They have challenged what they perceived as the more backward aspects of school life that had nothing to do with learning, like corporal punishment (which they see as unjustifiable violence against children), competition, and appearance-related regulations like length of hair and uniforms. Instead, the alternative parents encourage co-operative work habits, socially conscious behaviour, self-directed activity and good interpersonal skills. Some of these cultural priorities (notably

¹⁴² Note also how the Aquarius Festival fixes this event in time.

autonomy) are expressed extremely coherently in the following interview with a primary school pupil.

Well, I don't like it [the state school in Nimbin] because I don't really like getting bossed around all the time like that, cos you're getting bossed around constantly. And I don't like the things ... like their sports, I don't like their sports and I don't like their dancing and I don't like anything they do really.

Sensitive New Age Guise, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

The alternative lifestyle parents put a great deal of emphasis on quality education that is fun, holistic and relevant. Children should be able to explore something until they have finished, rather than be controlled by a timetable. This again reflects the struggle that the alternative lifestyle has with “industrial” time over “natural” time.

One parent related to me how she had gone to the alternative school at which her children (aged 5 and 6) were enrolled to question why the girls were playing cards (poker) so much and not learning to read, write or do maths. The teacher pointed out that the girls were in fact learning many skills by playing cards – numbers, sets, symbol and pattern recognition, record keeping, sequencing, as well as co-operation and strategy skills.

Being generally well educated themselves, alternative parents are in a good position to assist the education process. The level of involvement in their children's education is the result of the extra amounts of “discretionary” time that is available to them. This involvement in the schooling of their children reflects



Life in Nimbin can be as unexpectedly interesting as it is fun. This group of Tuntable Falls School pupils, on a camp at Rummery Park in the Nightcap Range, was enlisted to help health authorities to find leeches for a medical emergency. Photo: Northern Star. [Picture and caption sourced from the 1998 Visions of Nimbin fund-raising calendar.]

ideological priorities translated into domestic and political activity, particularly in the move away from state schools to independent alternative schools and home schooling.

The Nimbin Community School was registered in 1977. Tunttable Falls Primary School followed in 1981, and the Daystar Steiner School in 1983. The proliferation of these independent schools showed the demand for a different kind of education, and it showed that there was a school-age alternative population to support them.

In the last few years, the alternative schools have been suffering from falling student numbers, and parental input had been dropping. The high number of migrants and the turnover at the alternative schools has made it difficult for them to plan: student numbers at the schools have not only varied wildly from year to year, but even from term to term.¹⁴³ The fees of around \$100 per term are a consideration for people on low incomes, along with the fact that the state schools cater for alternative children much better than when the area was first settled by the alternative community.

Nimbin Central School has changed considerably over the last twenty years, to the point where it has become much more acceptable to many of the parents who would otherwise have considered alternative education for their children. [John Knapen.]

“Community Schools: Are They Still Relevant?” *Nimbin News*, June–July 1996, 4.

Ironically, many the children wanted to transfer to the state schools. The Daystar Steiner School was closed and replaced by the Rainbow Ridge School in 1996. Nimbin Community School has also closed and Sunrise Cottage, the home of alternative education in the village for many years, was put on the market.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ “Community Schools: Are They Still Relevant?” *Nimbin News*, June–July 1996, 4.

¹⁴⁴ Significantly, they were soliciting offers from community groups for this building to continue its tradition as a community-owned space. A large portion of the income from the building was donated to the new Community Centre, and the remainder was held by the trust for maintenance on their other building, the “Tomato Sauce” building.

And basically what happens is that the kids were very happy to be there and thrived there until they were about 10 years old when they wanted to go to the real school and have real teachers and wear uniforms and do all the things that we were madly escaping from. [Laughs.]

Aquarius Revisited: Under The Rainbow – A Social Experiment, That's History Programme, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1993.

Generally speaking, the alternative schools looked to provide child-centred learning, had a high level of parental input and used an integrated model of learning. The Nimbin Community School provided a flexible combination of straight school or home schooling with time spent at the alternative school.¹⁴⁵ The Nimbin Community School, in addition to the traditional “three R’s” of reading, writing and arithmetic, had a corresponding set – responsibility, reflection and respect.

I suppose my idea of the ideal is that kids grow up able to think for themselves and make their own choices. The difference between them and us is that as a kid I was told what to think and do. If that is the non-ideal, then what I’m looking for is kids who can make informed choices for themselves.

Interview with Micky, May 1998.

In the state schools, the alternative parents have extra clout because it is their children that make up the “vital numbers” to keep schools open. If they took their children from the local state schools the children of *all* the locals would have to travel further to school. This means that there is a constant pressure for quality education. If a one-teacher country school has a poor teacher who is resistant to change then many parents will remove their children to another school. This can mean some small rural schools are forced to close.

For example, the one-room Boorabee Park School (half a kilometre from where we lived) suffered an out-migration of pupils. The story went that the teacher at the school would leave the older girls (10 year olds) in charge of the youngest pupils while he took

¹⁴⁵ “We are happy to enroll full and part-time students and provide support for home schoolers.” “Learning for Life,” *Nimbin News*, June–July 1996, 5.

the boys down to fish in the river. Several of the parents took exception to this and withdrew their children and enrolled them at Manifold School with more “with it” teachers. The Boorabee Park school was closed shortly after due to an unsustainable roll. This happened despite the strategies of local straight people to keep it open – for example the renting of farm cottages to families *with* children who (all things being equal) were expected to attend the local country school.¹⁴⁶

The key determinants on the saleability of workers’ labour power is their educational standard. This can be shown to vary radically between different classes of the population, at least through such measures as the relationship between the socio-economic status of persons at a school and the academic outcomes of a school.

A longitudinal five-year study into a cohort of nearly five and a half thousand New Zealand students from third form to seventh form showed that the quality of teachers and the area are less important than the class background of the parents. Roy Nash and Richard Harker found that factors such as social class and family expectations are what determine educational outcomes. They found that the difference between schools, evaluated on teaching quality alone, made only a difference of plus or minus one mark in a School Certificate examination.

[Educational success] “... comes down to family resources,” Professor Harker says. “And by resources, we mean knowledge, time, income and the value placed on education within the family.”

“Families build successful students,” *Massey*, Issue 4, May 1998, 20.

This study supports the idea that the high educational background and white-collar upbringing of many of the alternative lifestyle migrants contributes significantly to their children’s success at school. Two of the state schools in the zone (one primary and one

¹⁴⁶ Again we see that decisions (first the decision to employ this particular teacher, and later the decision to close the school) made in the city have an effect on rural areas and the services provided within those communities, and the struggle waged by local people to counter those core-periphery processes.

secondary) were named in the top 25 schools in the state in 1996, graded on student improvement rather than simply on academic outcome.¹⁴⁷ The Nimbin School News in the November-December 1989 issue of *Nimbin News* noted that Nimbin Central School pupils had achieved well above state averages.

Nimbin Central again has year 10 moderator results well above state averages. In the advanced Maths course 100% of students received results in the top two grade categories. Results in other courses reflected similar patterns substantially above average. In English over 50% of our candidates received gradings in the top 30% of NSW studies.

“Nimbin School News,” *Nimbin News*, November-December 1989, 2.

One of the questions to which I was seeking an answer at the beginning of this research project was whether the average level of education in Nimbin would drop as more migrants arrived from working class backgrounds. I decided that if you take the alternative community as a “family,” then the advantages of living within a pro-education environment would support favourable educational outcomes for students of all ages and class backgrounds in the Nimbin area, despite the increase in the number of blue-collar migrants.

The reason is that alternative people (as a class) have a broad education and we can expect it to be connected with higher educational outcomes for their children. Added to this is the generally greater amount of interaction between parents and their children than they would have experienced if the children had been in the city with city things to do and the parents had been fulltime workers. I think that the alternative culture supports and permits education among beneficiaries in a way that is unachievable in the urban areas. I suspect that the low material needs of the alternative way of life allow continued formal adult learning, and “learning for life” is the slogan of and key to alternative education.

¹⁴⁷ “Schools on top 25 list,” *Northern Star*, 25 November 1996, 6.

There appear to be high levels of delayed education in addition to the high levels of tertiary qualifications among the alternative lifestyle population as a whole. I suspect that their low material expectations mean that studying as an adult is easier. They have the resources, or more particularly, the resourcefulness to sustain several years of study on very low incomes. This lifestyle represents an opportunity for people who would not otherwise have gained tertiary education on account of their class background and previous lack of education. Being enrolled in a recognised course of study is also a way of keeping the state off your back while still retaining a benefit.

6.4 Voluntary work

The alternative lifestyle participants live useful, productive lives, and make a significant (and measurable) contribution to mainstream Australia.¹⁴⁸ Through an enormous amount of underpaid and unpaid domestic work, and through voluntary and low paid community work, the alternative lifestyle community contributes a great deal to the well being of the Australian economy.¹⁴⁹

Efforts that have been made to value the contribution of unwaged labour to the gross national product (GNP) suggest that it is equivalent to at least 30–40 percent of GNP in developed countries ...

Horsfield, *Women in the Economy*, 1988, 30.

The arrival of the alternative lifestyle participants has had positive spin-offs for the rural population. By re-populating the area, and through enormous amounts of voluntary work, the alternative lifestyle community has made viable many services that were under threat of closure on account of under-utilisation.

¹⁴⁸ For a discussion on how voluntary and unpaid labour underpins capital production see Ann Else, *False Economy*, 1996 and Marilyn Waring, *Counting for Nothing*, 1998.

¹⁴⁹ “Statistics New Zealand has estimated the dollar value of unpaid work at around \$22 billion a year.” “All work and no pay: Ann Else,” *The Dominion*, 19 August 1996, 13.

Thus the new settlers were able to re-populate rural lands and put life back into declining villages and make community services like hospitals and schools viable again. For example, the Nimbin Hospital which was closed at the time of the Aquarius Festival for want of a resident GP was re-opened for the Festival and has been open ever since with an expanding service role. ... Nimbin Central School was threatened with downgrading to primary status. Now Nimbin is to get a high school.

Dunstan, *Images from the Edge*, Position Paper, 1994, 5.

The early years of child rearing often have the positive outcome of giving parents links to, and a role in, their community via their children.¹⁵⁰ They are likely to be recruited into voluntary community work, as a natural progression arising from the way of life – from involvement in the lives of their children, from the ideology that promotes community responsibility and the from the external economic and political pressures that make that activity necessary.

The possibility, indeed the necessity, for rationalising the ethos of self-sufficiency by setting up alternative institutions in the local area – food co-ops, schools, healing centres and so on – began to be recognised.

Tilden, *Women in Intentional Communities*, 1991, 13.

Imagine having rent free shelter and no mortgage. Imagine how it would free up your time and creativity to personal growth, community service, worthy causes, making art and paying attention to our children, youth and their future.

Dunstan, *Images From the Edge*, Position Paper, 1994, 6.

The changing needs thrown up by life-cycle changes (for example, having children) have led to an increasing demand for social services. Often they would provide these services themselves, and in the process they developed personal and political power.

Over time many of the solutions and practices this cultural group created or resurrected for “home use” have become available to the mainstream. Many alternative people have learned valuable skills from their unique domestic mode of production as they sought

¹⁵⁰ See Tilden, *Women in Intentional Communities*, 1991, 323.

some degree of autonomy from the mainstream: for example in housing, health, education, and ecology. They learned practical skills and then these skills led them to get involved in community activities, directing them into certain areas of political work as well. In other words, their material interests compelled them into certain kinds of political activity.¹⁵¹ These activities have often grown into paid and unpaid community work – as they work to provide community resources that they identify as lacking for themselves and their families and friends.

The history of the Nimbin community is filled with people active in service to the community: youth workers, community developers, councillors, politicians, drug-law reformers, historians and writers, film makers, educators, healers, conservationists, home-birth activists, artists, entertainers and cross-cultural workers.

Much volunteer work is done around Nimbin by our members, for example at the Neighbourhood Centre, Environment Centre, Seed Savers Group, sporting groups and *Nimbin News*. At Tuntable Falls we have created employment opportunities with our own primary school and preschool, and with the Rainbow Café in Nimbin. Many of our members increase their well-being through our local LETS (Local Employment and Trading System). The Rainbow Power Company in Nimbin was formed and is run by individuals from Tuntable Falls and other MO's. [Gloria Constine.]

Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality*, 1995, 80.

The white-collar social service background of many of the original alternative lifestyle migrants also impacts on the type of work and the approach they bring to the area. Their skills and cultural priorities impacted on the way they enacted their politics and for some provided an avenue for future employment. The alternative lifestyle participants tend towards consensus and finding the best solutions for all parties rather than majority decision-making. They lay considerable value on being non-judgmental, facilitative, and having highly developed interpersonal skills. These skills provided an avenue for future employment as community and social workers, politicians, union organisers, educators, media experts, mediators and so on.

¹⁵¹ This will be taken up further in *CLASS FOR ITSELF*, page 419.

The Homebuilders Association is a perfect example of how an organisation engendered by a domestic need can come to have a powerful political role. To build their own homes was another “personal freedom” fought for and won by the alternatives, and largely on the grounds of it is the “right” of Australians to do so. Their name, Homebuilders Association, has layers of meaning: implying the physical construction of a home, the social location of “home,” and the idea that these houses be self-built by their inhabitants.

Chapter 7. Land Use Patterns

7.0 Introduction

This chapter looks at the way that the alternative lifestyle migrants use their land.

Although most alternative lifestyle participants do not make an income directly from the land, their lifestyle is still land-based. What they primarily do on the land is inhabitation, rather than production for sale.

I will show that there is an economic value of inhabitation. This chapter also identifies the way in which the mode of production imposes restrictions on the way people live on the land. At the same time their land use expresses their ideological priorities, or to put it another way, their culture is embedded in the material practice of their land use.

7.1 Reviewing the theory of ground rent

Land plays the key role in agriculture and unlike other means of (industrial) production, it is not a product of human labour and cannot be reproduced. The landowners have a monopoly on this non-renewable resource. The amount of arable land in every country is limited and consequently even marginal land is farmed. This is unlike other commodities in which inferior products find no market in the long run.

The prices of agricultural produce, unlike the prices of industrial articles, are determined not by average conditions, but by the production conditions on the poorest agricultural land.

Afanasyev et al, *The Political Economy of Capitalism*, 1974, 121.

In *Capital*, Marx makes a clear distinction between two different kinds of ground rent: differential rent and absolute rent. Ricardo said, “Rent is always the difference between the produce obtained by the employment of two equal quantities of capital and labour.”

Marx added the rider, "... on equal areas of land."¹⁵² The novelty of Marx's analysis lies entirely in his discussion of absolute rent. Absolute rent is the basic (minimum) rent that is paid for the use of any piece of land, regardless of the merits of its fertility or location. No capitalist landowner permits the use of their land for nothing. If someone wants to use it then (by implication) that land assumes use-value.

Differential rent, which is the type of ground rent that concerns us, is the extra rent that is paid for the use of land that enjoys a higher fertility or a more favourable location.

[D]ifferential rent [arises] out the capitalist monopoly of the land as an object of economic activity, which emerges as a result of the limited availability of land and differences in its fertility and locality.

Afanasyev et al, *The Political Economy of Capitalism*, 1974, 121.

A person who cultivates on favourable land receives a surplus profit that takes the form of differential rent. This differential rent arises from the natural advantages of growing cannabis in the area, not from a difference in the amount of work or money invested in the crop. It is called differential rent because it arises out of the *difference* in productivity between favourable land and the worst land on which that crop is produced for sale and sold.

[I]t is evident that these two different causes of differential rent – fertility and location – may work in opposite directions. A certain plot of land may be very favourable located and yet be very poor in fertility, and vice versa.

Marx, *Capital*, Volume 3, 650.

The lower production costs entailed in higher fertility or better location of land is therefore passed to the landowner as rent. On more favourable land, for the same outlay of capital and labour, the farmer will constantly make a higher profit than persons who work less favourable land. In the case that the user of that land and the owner are one and the same person, then they appropriate this rent. When the land belongs to the state, it is the state that should receive the rent from the users of the land.

¹⁵² Marx, *Capital*, Volume III, 649.

[I]t is evident that this rent is always a differential rent, for it does not enter as a determining factor into the general production price of commodities, but rather is based on it. It invariably arises from the difference between the individual production price of a particular capital having command over the monopolised natural force, on the one hand, and the general production price of the total capital invested in the sphere of production concerned, on the other.

Marx, *Capital*, Volume 3, 646.

Marx also commented that there were other causes than fertility and location in the fixing of ground rents, and pointed to the way agriculture is taxed, the inequalities in agricultural development, and the wealth inequalities that impact on agricultural investment.¹⁵³ These factors can be seen as the consequence of core-periphery processes.

This surplus-profit, then, is likewise equal to the difference between the individual price of production of these favoured producers and the general social price of production regulating the market in their entire production sphere. This difference is equal to the excess of the general price of production of the commodity over their individual price of production. The two regulating limits of this excess are, on the one hand, the individual cost-price, and thus the individual price of production, and, on the other hand, the general price of production.

Marx, *Capital*, Volume 3, 641.

Differential rent is comprised of two types, I and II, depending on how the excess profit is formed. Type I simply depends on the fertility and location of the land. Type II is derived from the different productivity of additional capital investment in the land.

7.2 The development of primary industry in Nimbin

This chapter will first trace the history of land-use prior to the first wave of alternative migrants. By looking at the ways in which the land in the area was used before their arrival, we are in a position to understand the material forces that enabled the alternative migration, and how it impacts on the productive ways in which they use the land.

¹⁵³ Marx, *Capital*, Volume III, 650.

This section will take into account the macro-economic factors that influenced the way people in the Nimbin area earned a living on the land. I have already looked at how core-periphery pressures impacted (and impact) in Nimbin, at the underdevelopment of the primary industry section, at effective isolation and transport.

The Nimbin dairy industry declined in the 1960s. This was due to centralisation as Australia modernised in keeping with changing EEC regulations. The big dairy company, Norco, built a large factory in Lismore and closed down all the small butter factories in the surrounding villages. The deregulation of the milk quota system further hurt the struggling dairy farmers, and the bigger players in the economy bought out the farmer-owned and controlled dairy co-operatives. These economic events changed the general price of production. They also show core-periphery processes simultaneously interacting on a global and local scale.

With the recession of the late 1960's and early 1970's, the local dairy industry collapsed. This, combined with the previous closure of the Butter Factory, ensured that only the hardest of the local farmers were able to continue. The population of the district was falling, from 6020 in 1961 to 4520 in 1971.

Nimbin & Environs, July 1993, 4.

In these processes we can see the impact of larger core industrial capital on the small locally owned and operated ventures. This spelled the end to the relative autonomy of the economies dependent upon that industry. Reports show that between 1960 and 1969, thirty-eight percent of dairy farms had ceased production. Then between 1968 and 1978, fifty percent of dairy farmers in the North Coast region left the industry.¹⁵⁴

As farmers were forced off the land, the entire rural economy was threatened. This capitalist transition (intensification) echoes Marx's analysis of the mid-1800s agricultural revolution in Europe.

Thus, hand in hand with the expropriation of the self-supporting peasants, with their separation from their means of production, goes the destruction of rural

¹⁵⁴ Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 30.

domestic industry, the process of separation between manufacture and agriculture. And only the destruction of rural domestic industry can give the internal market of a country that extension and consistence which the capitalist mode of production requires.

Marx, *Capital*, 1978, Volume 1, 699-700.

These changes had flow-on effects on the Nimbin economy. First, fewer farm workers were required to farm the same amount of land, and the children of farmers migrated to the cities in search of work. This left ageing parents on many farms that had diminishing returns (debt burden) which meant when they came (or were forced) to sell, the land was cheap. Second, farm labourer's cottages were vacant which meant that rent was affordable to alternative lifestyle participants and a source of a small but regular cash income for farmers.

Farms were originally a lot larger and over time they were sub-divided within families through inheritance. Recently, the opposite process of agricultural consolidation (the concentration of agricultural land in fewer hands) has proceeded rapidly due to the decline of farming profitability. This has meant that the farms are creeping back to the size of the original selections. To survive in 1998, a traditional farming venture needed to be about 50% bigger than was still viable in 1990. To invest in more land and machinery, farmers need to borrow money. High interest rates coupled with poor returns and bad weather meant that farm debt had risen 34% in the decade from 1988 to 1998. Whenever farm income falls, rural businesses fail, central services like shops, post offices, banks, hospitals and schools close, and people leave. For much of the Australian rural economy these trends continue. In the 1997-98 financial year, 64% of farmers lost money and one third survived only through off-farm income.¹⁵⁵

Very few people are moving to the countryside from the city to take up farming in a traditional way. That is because there's a declining ecological niche for straight farmers in the region, and persons who have grown up as farmers already fill it. Despite the

¹⁵⁵ "Outback revolt threatens political establishment," *Evening Post*, 14 July 1998, 9.

higher over-all population, there is a decline in the number of people employed in farm work, as reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

There has been growth in “rural” areas along the coast although the numbers employed in farm work have fallen over the last decade.

Burnley, *Atlas of the Australian People – 1991 Census New South Wales*, 1996, 19.
[Emphasis mine.]

Family workers engaged in low productivity farming activities do not appear in the unemployment statistics. These farm workers are unavailable for fulltime work elsewhere because they are considered to be gainfully employed, and although the gain is not great in many cases, it is in their long-term interests to retain ownership and control of their properties. This shows the ability of farms to absorb surplus labour, and can explain why few straights become alternative lifestyle participants.

A person who is already living on a farm is able to undertake useful farm labour even if the immediate economic reward is quite minimal. They can effectively be working for nothing (or the amount of the dole) but the work that they do is more effective than receiving a benefit. If you work on a farm where the economic benefit from your work amounts to \$150 a week, while it’s not enough to pay you a proper wage, it’s still worth more *in the long run* than the dole.

Economists Paul Cockshott and Allin Cottrell conducted an analysis of the British economy with a view to showing that prices were determined by embodied labour.¹⁵⁶ They did this by taking the total value of output of particular industries and dividing them by the total number of hours that were put into that industry. For most industries there was a very strong correlation between prices and labour content. However, they found that there were a couple of industries in Britain for which the correlation was much weaker than others. One of them was agriculture, and they argued that this was

¹⁵⁶ This information came to me from a Marxist internet discussion group, however it is also contained in the Spring 1995 edition of the periodical, *Capital and Class*. The article is called “Testing Labour-Value Theory with Input-Output Tables.”

because labour inputs in agriculture were seriously understated by virtue of poorly paid and unpaid family labour on farms.¹⁵⁷

So for the children of land-owning parents their interests are served by staying on (or returning to) the land because they will one day inherit the farm. Even though the farm might not provide a “proper wage” in the meantime, their interests are in the long-term capital gain from the value of the farm. When people do move from the cities to farm they are often children of farmers and it is increasingly likely that one member of the household has an off-farm income. What is seldom commented upon is that the farmers are also attached to their land and a rural lifestyle and also make sacrifices and strategise to stay.

Even the less well-off section of the straight rural farming community produces very few alternative lifestyle participants. There are very good economic reasons for this – you don’t have to appeal to the idea of “rural conservatism” to find the answers to why this is so. Most significantly, they already own farms (or their parents do) and to remain viable the straight farmers must pursue profit-oriented land management. A failure to do so means that they lose their land. The economic history of straight land-ownership and its management enforce a certain way of living on that land: subsisting on the land is not an option because the banks would foreclose on them. Straight farmers have too much equity in their land and too little cash flow to contemplate living on their land in the manner of an alternative lifestyle participant, and direct benefits subsidies are available to them under specific conditions (such as drought relief) but not to help them continue to live on their land as farmers. Subsidies to farmers more usually take the form of subsidies to the industry as a whole – such as trade and industry tariffs.

¹⁵⁷ The other industry that showed a weak correlation was the oil industry. North Sea oil was cheap and of good quality, so the weak correlation between labour and prices for the British oil industry was because of the existence of a differential rent.

7.3 Alternative settlement of the land

Land ownership

For some alternative lifestyle participants land ownership is made possible by the low but steady income from welfare benefits, coupled with affordable land (including shared land), a low cost of living and a rejection of a consumerist lifestyle. The smooth benefit income makes this kind of land ownership achievable. Payments on the mortgage take place instead of rent payments, and make land ownership financially within reach of beneficiaries.

The alternative lifestyle pattern of land ownership differs from the straight population in that there is much more communal ownership, share title, multiple ownership, cross leasing and so on. In the early settlement phase, few of the alternative migrants were able to purchase an entire farm outright as individuals or afford the high cost of formal subdivision. Land was often purchased by some kind of formal or informal consortium instead. This also sidestepped problems in attempting to gain permission to sub-divide rural properties. Land sales are different from mainstream too, and include more private sales because the margins on shared land sales don't usually justify the time taken to conduct the purchase.

These different land-owning arrangements make it possible for the new settlers to buy land. The arrangements mean, however, that the alternative community finds it harder to borrow investment capital on account of their land ownership patterns. This depresses land prices to some extent, keeping it affordable. Sometimes too, the conditions of sale of shared land are affected by the rules of particular communities.

This means that when you are building your house on common land the banks won't lend you money [with your land as] collateral. It does mean that it's a low cost housing option, a lot of people support that.

Interview with Bob McKay, November 1996.

Not being able to borrow means that you are constrained vis-à-vis how you use the land. Its complex ownership also has implications for selling, often meaning higher

commitment because it's so hard to leave. It is easy to see why there is political pressure from within a section of the alternative lifestyle community for changes to these rules. Now the debate is concerned with the changes to Multiple Occupancy regulations that will allow a different kind of title, which in turn will allow people to buy and sell shares more freely and to obtain a mortgage on their land so they can finance building a house.

[T]hey've developed a new [Multiple Occupancy type] called community title, it's a mix of old and new. Basically up here about 80% of the property is held by the commune, each individual house-block site of about half an acre each, is free-hold land. So you actually own your own house site, and can borrow against it.

Interview with Bob McKay, November 1996

The changes to the Multiple Occupancy regulations that disallowed further MO's and then reintroduced legislation that made them more "individual" and less "communal," are seen by supporters of intentional communities to be the result of pressure from real estate agents, who witness a large number of land transactions that they don't have any dealings with. There's a huge amount of anti real estate agent sentiment in Nimbin.



Given that Lifestyle Real Estate is the name of an existing business in Nimbin, the excerpt below can only be seen as a criticism.¹⁵⁸ One of the iconic words

(lifestyle) of this class of persons has been usurped, commodified in a way that is widely perceived as not in the interests of that class.

We described it [the Aquarius Festival] as a "lifestyle" festival (these were the days before the word was seized as a marketing hook eg. Lifestyle Real Estate) ...

Dunstan, *Images from the Edge*. Position Paper, 1994, 1. [Emphasis mine.]

¹⁵⁸ Photo sourced from the website: Nimbin ... Hippy Capital of the Universe, <http://rainbowweb.com/nimbin.htm>

This is not an isolated incident, and a great deal of criticism was directed at the activities of some would-be developers during the purchase of the Community Centre and the submission process regarding changes to Multiple Occupancy legislation.¹⁵⁹

Profit making is not the primary objective of the alternative lifestyle participants in the Nimbin region. The settlement of rural land is the realisation of an Aquarian dream of migration from the city to the country in order to inhabit it. You can have a “dream” of buying a piece of land, but you can’t have a “dream” of dealing in land (selling land as a commodity) with a profit-motive. You can sell the land, but selling it was never the point of it. This means that the purchase of land should not be seen as a way of making money as it is for property speculators or persons who might purchase bits of land as a way of ensuring their superannuation.

So while the alternative ideology validates the purchase of land by individuals like themselves, it doesn’t condone the marketing and exploitation of land by developers and real estate agents. The real estate land purchase process allows anyone to move because it is subsumed to a purely economic transaction. If migration was still dependent on inter-connections and networks, then some screening could occur. The changes to the state regulations on land purchase make sales of shared rural land (Multiple Occupancies) more of a financial event and less of a social (communal) process. Many people were opposed to changes to the Multiple Occupancy regulations. They blame powerful real estate lobby groups, because there is high demand for and little profit in Multiple Occupancy developments, for the repeal of the regulations.

¹⁵⁹ See CLASS FOR ITSELF: The struggle for the Community Centre, page 447.

Eventually in the mid-90's, the State Government (a different one by then) **succumbed to the pressures of various land developers, real estate salesmen, interest groups and other greedy bastards** and handed the whole thing back over to the local councils. The direct result for our area was an immediate halt to any future alternative or co-operatively owned land ventures. Meanwhile, Lismore Council happily approved a whole series of almost suburban developments in previously rural areas.

Nimbin Website.¹⁶⁰ [Emphasis mine.]

The belief that the real estate industry was involved in pressuring the state for changes to the Multiple Occupancy legislation (State Environment Planning Policy 15, known as SEPP 15) was supported by comments made by Ian Cohen, the NSW Green Party's Member of Parliament. In his address to the legislative council he said that the Real Estate lobby group constantly pressed the local National Party members of Parliament for its [SEPP 15] repeal.¹⁶¹ Their actions have been seen as “anti-community,” and this has positioned developers and landlords as the class enemy in Nimbin.

This is one of the areas in which the alternatives are in conflict with straightforward capitalist institutions, primarily the real estate market and development finance organisations. Class interests are fought out on this issue. Real estate agents, professional landlords and developers are often pilloried in alternative publications for being greedy and usurping the dream. Pressure for changes to land ownership (particularly Multiple Occupancy regulations) could make the alternative lifestyle less sustainable. If land prices rise sharply, higher values translate into higher rates and the benefit peasantry would be competing in a more difficult market for land against richer people. This is where the commodification of land is different from a simple case of smoothing the entry of persons to land. Such changes could result in the transformation of the class structure in the area, like it did in nearby Port Douglas.

¹⁶⁰ http://www.nimbin.net/alternatives/alt_communities.htm

¹⁶¹ “Reinstatement of SEPP 15,” *Nimbin News*, June–July 1997, 5.

One day it's a small hippie haven on the North Queensland coast, the next day, a couple of millionaires buy a few blocks for half a million dollars or a million dollars, suddenly all the land is worth that, the rates are rated at the land value. The people that bought their land twenty years ago, for two and a half thousand bucks, now their rates are more than what they paid for it, and dirt poor people that've just been living there subsistence can all of a sudden sell and get half a million, and then go somewhere and buy a heaps bigger piece of land. If they want to go bush, the incentive is there for them to sell up and move on. There's benefits if you're willing to give in and go with the flow, but if you really like the place and want to stay there, you just get priced out, or cold-shouldered out. Everyone else suddenly becomes a different social stratum, you know.

Interview with Micky, May 1998.

The cost of land was one of the features that permitted the initial alternative migration to take place. By the 1980s land prices had risen rapidly and the cost of land had impacted on the migrating population.¹⁶² Most farmers, for instance, could not afford to buy in or near Nimbin and in any case there is good farming land available elsewhere for less money. Rising land costs have meant that it is richer migrants who come to the Nimbin area and purchase land, and there are other migrants who have no intention or ability to buy land at all.

In the past few years, a richer assortment of people than ever before has brought land and settled in Nimbin. The early years after Aquarius resulted in a land "boom;" prices soared, as the land became once more desirable, and are now out of the reach of the sort of young families who moved to the town in the 70's.

Nimbin Centenary 1882-1982, 1982, 141.

During the mid-1990s, the rising value of land, and therefore rates, have triggered another (outwards) migration of some of the first alternative lifestyle settlers and an inwards migration of wealthier migrants to the area. Other would-be migrants are forced, on account of the price of land, to settle elsewhere. This has led to the spreading out of

¹⁶² Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 35.

the alternative zone over the period of settlement, to the west and places like Drake, Tabulam, and Mallanganee and to the northeast to localities like Wilsons Creek.¹⁶³

Someone will move [out West] ... buy a block, and realise that everywhere around them is for sale really cheap, quickly make sure that all their friends come and buy a block too. It may not be a community but it's a lot better than ... in fact it's even better ... it's like you've all got your own block but you're all friends and at least you're starting off with some common ground.

Interview with Micky, October 1997

Many alternatives see their inhabitation of the land as fulfilling a custodial role, and make a symbolic connection to the Aboriginal practice of custodianship. Land ownership by the benefit peasants is always connected with the notion of taking the land away from harmful exploitation and giving it a gentler use by which the land can recuperate while they reside there.

[Instead by buying a house and section in town] you could've gone and bought two hundred acres out here. I'd definitely go for size myself, you know. People love the land ... Personally, I'd find it very hard, if I had to sell land. I think I'd just want to keep adding on ... wanting to protect it.

Interview with Micky, June 1998.

Like many aspects of the alternative culture, land use practices embody economic, political and ideological threads that cannot be considered apart but must be seen as an integrated whole. The idea that the land is not there for exploiting is another of the ideological constructs of the alternative lifestyle culture. They have a use for the land that is separate from the use a buyer and seller of land and houses might have – they are not primarily investors as such, but are landholders. As landholders, this gives them access to benefits as well.

You know, we were all very poor. We had no money, we had no jobs but in the early days we looked on the dole as a form of rural subsidy where it allowed people

¹⁶³ The spreading out of the alternative zone can be seen in the iso-votes map showing the changing territory of the non-National vote. See CLASS FOR ITSELF: Iso-votes, page 455.

like ourselves to establish ourselves on degraded land and there's no doubt that the land was terribly degraded by years of over-grazing and being used as pasture in the dairy and cattle industry, and also from being over-logged and eroded because of that. So we felt that we were there to put something back into the land, and also take the land off the endless cycle of capitalism.

Aquarius Revisited: Under The Rainbow – A Social Experiment. That's History Programme, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1993.

Land use differs markedly between the straight and alternative lifestyle populations. Given the impoverished nature of the land, it was unlikely the pioneer alternative lifestyle migrants would be able to wrest a living from it, especially when the experienced farmers had failed to do so. Therefore it was not appropriate to consider land as a capital investment in “means of production” when it was first purchased twenty-five years ago.

Inhabitation

The main land-use activity of the alternatives is inhabitation. This means that elements of their lifestyle that in straight society would be “outside” the home are an integral part of the domestic economy of alternative lifestyle persons. This is because the degree of separation between public and private is so much less. There is an integration of what in the mainstream are distinct public and private domains – rather than having a “job” that is separate from the rest of their life, their “way of life” is in fact their “work.”

The process of the hippies coming to the land ... starting in the seventies it was a time ... it was a time where the rural land was clapped out, the price for stuff was fucking up because of the common market ... so the land up here was really shot, the hippies moved in, brought it up cheap, they wanted the back-to-the-earth thing, but also the land that they were taking was marginalised land, it'd been over-farmed and even the ones who did try and get something out of the land, compared with what had been taken out of it before, it was pretty low intensity, so the land has regenerated.

Interview with Micky, October 1998

The straight community manages land with production for an external market in mind, and the alternative lifers manage land primarily as internal domestic units, and sell any surplus. This difference is reflected in the land buying criteria of the early alternative

migrants – with isolation, water, forest and affordability as the basis of their choice, rather than “commercial” aspects like the quality of the soil, access, power and telephone connections, fences and other kinds of farming infrastructure.

[Land] favoured by the new settlers [was] characteristically secluded, well watered, preferably with a creek and cheap – or at least within their financial grasp, and with timber or some forest.

Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 35.

This quote from a section on small business opportunities in *Nimbin & Environs* shows that growing things is still part of ideology despite the fact that only small fraction of people actually get their primary income from the land. The quote also shows that the relatively passive land use of the early alternative migrants had substantially improved the quality of the land by 1993.

Organic vegies, permaculture/bio dynamic style, supply some foods on small acreages. ... (Agriculturally, this is very good land and permaculture was developed to cope with these local conditions).

Nimbin & Environs, 1993, 2, 28.

The class position of the alternative lifestyle participants is determined by their way of making a living. What they do is basically inhabit a piece of land. Hence their urge to inhabit (and therefore protect) a rainforest zone is just as much an economic urge as the urge of a timber owner to cut those trees down and sell the wood for money. Because the state owned the forest, the alternative activists were again forced into a political struggle and succeeded in having the area in question protected. Importantly too, their role as inhabitants (rather than farmers) reduces the pressure to graze animals and permits forest regeneration. These ideas are expressed by Leigh Davison and Jennie Dell in the following quotes.

Having an off-farm income, I am fortunate to be able to work the land without the same financial pressures to which most farmers are subject. There is a strong aesthetic priority in what I try to achieve. “**How would it look?**” rather than “**how much money will it make?**” is usually the operative question. In working to blend the 50 acres of farmland with the 200 [re]forested acres, my agricultural pursuit has assumed a cultural overtone. [Leigh Davison.] [Emphasis mine.]

Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality*, 1995, 53.

We notice and give thanks for the thousands of trees now visible from the Lismore-Nimbin road, remembering the ringbarked desolation of a quarter century ago.

Jennie Dell, *Nimbin News*, June–July 1998, 3.

Since the Aquarian settlement soil protection and improvement measures (over the 25 years of their settlement) have meant some many people are now able to use their land productively, and in ways different to that of the straight community.¹⁶⁴

Peasant-style land-use patterns

The alternative lifestyle economy has many parallels with that of the traditional peasantry. As benefit peasants the alternatives are separated from capitalist production. They live rurally with their subsistence partly produced under a non-capitalist mode of production. A peasant is typically a small farmer who is not fully engaged in capitalist wage labour, and engages in individual subsistence agriculture on the land, and sells any surplus.

Furthermore, the cash portion of the benefit peasants is usually state support or state-subsidy. The state helps maintain their income either directly through benefits, or indirectly, by actions that maintain the cost of cannabis, on which the alternative lifestyle communities depend.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ This will be picked up again in LAND USE PATTERNS: Boutique farms and sustainable agriculture, page 211.

¹⁶⁵ See PRODUCTION RELATIONS: **Cannabis Cropping**, page 228.

The conditions under which some communes and intentional communities grow produce reminds me very much of communal peasant farming in the sense that there is a tension between what the commune produces and what they produce as individuals, and in their relationship to the market.

Some persons within the worldwide rural alternative movement have a perception of themselves as being peasants, having some interests opposed those of capitalism and of engaging in domestic rural production. Diana Lancaster is an alternative lifestyle farmer and a member of the Peasants by Choice network.

[B]eing rich or poor has nothing to do with we modern peasants. Caring about the planet does, both in general and for our own piece of land in particular. ... The incentive was to meet up with like-minded idiots, pick each others' brains and renew energy for a style of life that runs counter to the way the World Bank and multinational companies would like us to behave.¹⁶⁶

Lancaster, *Growing Today*, April 1994, 41.

It is useful to look at the relationships of peasants to a large-scale monopolist economy as an articulation of different modes of production. When the benefit peasantry are purchasing fertiliser or fuel from the supply monopolies under unfavourable conditions, it shows their subordinate class position. The benefit peasants, when they organise themselves into a commodity-producing entity become, naturally enough, small-scale handicrafts people, who will never be large-scale wholesalers or manufacturers. This is because they don't have access to the necessary development finance (and in any case probably don't want to) and as peasants are locked into a larger (capitalist) social formation.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ This quote also shows the anti-imperialist critique of many alternative lifestyle participants, enacted in a small-scale, individualistic manner.

¹⁶⁷ See VALUE-ADDED WORK: Rainbow Power case study, page 303.

Some communities, in a way similar to the English commons (land held in common by the peasants) even have common lands.¹⁶⁸ The Tuntable Falls intentional community,

[H]ave designated about 20 percent as either house sites or 'common land,' where members can graze cows, horses and goats. This common land is also used for community gardens, woodlots, orchards and dams. The rest of our land is native forest, some of it rainforest. [Gloria Constine]

Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality*, 1995, 80.

The state forests that surround the “hippie zone” in Nimbin should also be seen as common land, and they are sometimes cultivated with small plots of cannabis. The importance of these forests to the alternative way of life can be shown in their energetic defence of them.

The ownership of the Rainbow Café by the Tuntable Falls Co-operative, and the Neighbourhood Centre, Community Centre, Birth and Beyond, and independent schools by the Nimbin community shows that the “community spirit” in Nimbin likewise has a material base.¹⁶⁹ The shared ownership of the central business district means that it is harder for outsiders to take control of Nimbin. These community owned facilities take the place of the “commons” for more traditional peasant economies.

Another similarity between the traditional European peasantry and the benefit peasantry is the division of land into smaller parcels as the population grows. The alternative lifestyle participants arrived in Nimbin and purchased shares in entire farms. These farm blocks have since been sub-divided into smaller and smaller blocks.

¹⁶⁸ The move to different types of rural land sharing communities, might, like the “Enclosures,” spell an end to these “commons” in favour of more individualised holdings.

¹⁶⁹ The Rainbow Café may have to be sold by the Tuntable Falls Co-operative to pay settlement costs to an unhappy leaseholder. What remains to be seen is whether or not the local community can organise and sustain another “defence” of the central business district properties to keep it in alternative ownership. See *TOURISM: Rainbow Café - A Case Study*, page 268.

Boutique farms and sustainable agriculture

Benefit peasants require much smaller pieces of land than farmers. Half an acre, intensively managed, is the ideal size for a permaculture holding in the Nimbin area and this reflects a more intensive urban style of land use with a higher science “content.” Rather than growing mono-crops like a banana plantations or running a dairy unit, some alternative lifestyle farmers are today using their land to grow high-value crops that are tolerant of local conditions. The intensity of small-scale production allows crops such as organic produce, cannabis, echinacea or lemon grass for specific urban markets to be grown. Compared to beef farming the land is more intensively managed, makes higher use of scientific technique and absorbs more labour per hectare.

[Half the people surveyed] had less than 15 hectares and 14% had larger than 90 hectares. Over 70% did not own cattle and only 3% had more than 100. 90% did not derive their main income from the land.¹⁷⁰ [Mark Roucky.]

“The Local Beef Industry,” *Nimbin News*, February–March 1998, 29.

The 1998 Beef Industry survey results show that the benefit peasants’ primary source of (legal) income is *not* from the land and suggest that a tendency to more intensive land-use is still a minority one. The survey conducted by Mark Roucky (as part of a study for the government’s Ecologically Sustainable Development guidelines for agriculture) found a pattern of small land-holdings that are no longer used for traditional beef farming.

I think that this will change and some boutique farms with specialist niche market crops will suddenly become productive. Their existence has been veiled by the fact that the census collection didn’t include them and they haven’t yet earned enough money from the crop to get over the income-threshold for inclusion in some of the industry surveys. Yet, even for this group, the “new” land use will turn out to be a more successful way of

¹⁷⁰ The survey was designed to reflect a sustainable industry according to the government’s Ecologically Sustainable Development guidelines for agriculture.

earning a living than traditional forms of farming, and the alternative lifestyle economy will prevail.

Like other information, reliable statistics for agricultural production are unavailable for the North Coast Region. This is the result of changes to Census reporting in 1986/87. In order to eliminate small farms from the statistics the cut-off level for estimated value of agricultural operations was raised from \$2,500 to \$20,000. Regions with many small holdings (like the Nimbin area) are consequently unreported.

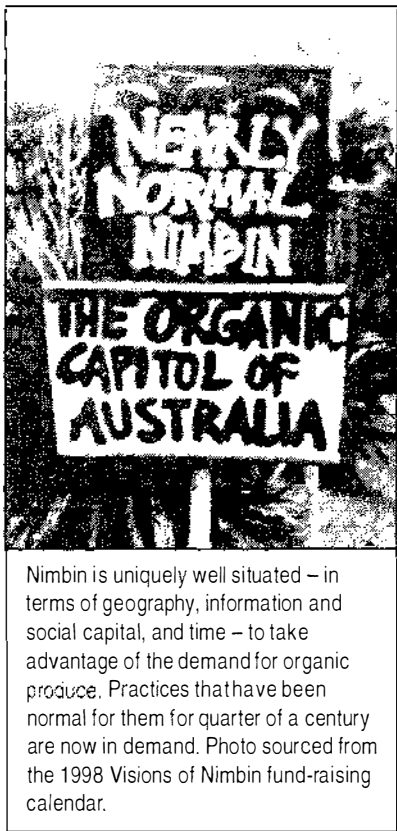
Figures for horticulture are even more inaccurate. Some industries have been surveyed in detail (eg kiwifruit) and errors of 100 per cent are not uncommon. These errors stem from the intensiveness of horticulture, and the fact that small areas can produce a high value of production per hectare. Often these farms have been subdivided from large non productive holdings, and upon subdivision the new owners have not been placed on the Census mailing list.

North Coast Agriculture Publication, Department of Agriculture, 1992. [Reported in Kenyon & Maunder, *Lismore Food Processing Business Incubator: Feasibility Study*, c1995, 9.]

A feasibility study for a food processing business incubator in Lismore identified several potential food products that could be promoted.¹⁷¹ Many of these represented new types of land-use and new crops. For example, they listed organic produce, soybeans, hydroponic crops, herbs, bush foods, Asian foodstuffs and coffee growing as primary produce. Product opportunities identified by the consultants included organics; herbs and oils for medicinal, culinary and cosmetic use; soya based products (oils, dressings, pates, tempeh, tamari, shoyu); fresh, frozen and dried vegetables and fruit; mushrooms; macadamia and avocado products; bush foods (dried, fresh, medicinal and cosmetics); condiments (jams, chillies, chutneys, sauces, dressings, spices, flavourings); baby foods and baked goods.

¹⁷¹ Amanda Kenyon & Luke Maunder, *Lismore Food Processing Business Incubator: Feasibility Study*. http://www.nor.com.au/business/gbec/lismore_food_processing.htm. c1995.

The influence of the resident alternative lifestyle community (and their city cohort who help create a demand for these products) can be clearly seen in this list. The list also demonstrates Australia’s growing ties with Asian markets and the demand for “clean and green” produce. The feasibility study demonstrates the development of land-use patterns far from the traditional (straight) agricultural practices of 25 years ago, and represents opportunities for all land users. Many straight farmers have been putting in soybean crops since 1995.



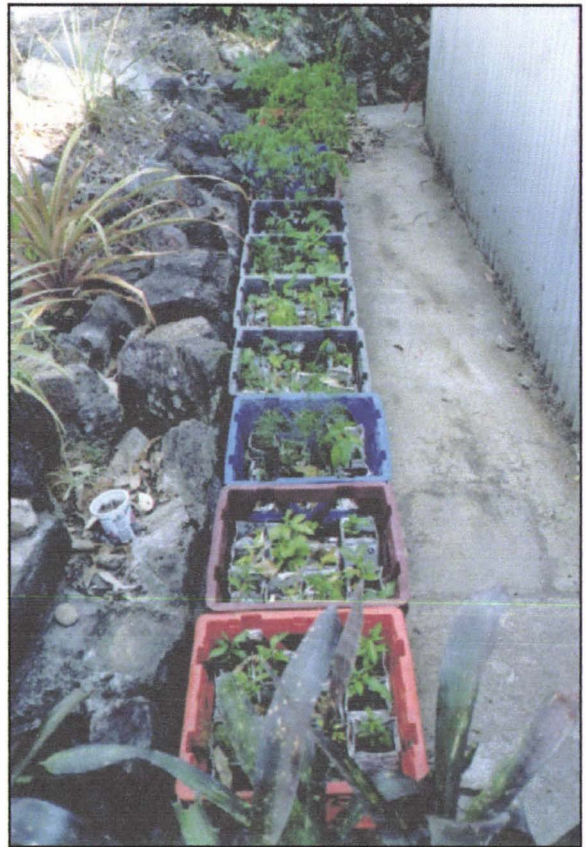
The authors of the study noted that presently there is not sufficient organic production to warrant the incubator being based solely on organic food processing. However, they went on to say, “this is an area which is attracting huge interest and may be an appropriate direction for the Incubator to aim.” They also report that organic agriculture was estimated to reach 10% of all agricultural production by the year 2000 (up from 1% in 1990), and that Australia’s share of the organic produce trade is approximately \$40 million (out of a US\$40 billion dollar international trade). Further, they reported that the demand for organics far exceeds production.

In an article written for a food industry publication in 1994 Prime Minister Paul Keating wrote, “The food industry must strive to become a preferred supplier of

quality foods in Australia and overseas, supply products valued for their quality, “clean” nature and the ability to meet the requirements of increasingly affluent and discriminating customers.” Australian produced foods have an internationally high

reputation for safe foods and this is considered to be a significant competitive advantage for the country.¹⁷²

If farmers switch to organic farming methods, and have a buyer for their produce, they can earn a great deal of money. For example, the *Nimbin News* reports that in 1999 the NSW Grains Board had just sold the largest cargo of canola ever to leave Australia. The 57,000 tonne shipment of guaranteed non-genetically modified canola seeds was valued at A\$26 million.¹⁷³ Ironically, a year later, this valuable market has been put at risk by the “trial” of thousands of acres of genetically modified canola seeds by agribusiness giant, Monsanto. The trials have a buffer zone of only 400 metres, despite the fact that bees will travel up to 6 kilometres. This has been a major concern for the Organic Federation of Australia who are worried that their new markets in Japan and Europe will disappear.¹⁷⁴



Picture of José's rainforest nursery. Note the use of recycled milk cartons as temporary plant pots, and milk crates as propagating trays. Photo: Sam Murray

The migration of city people to a rural lifestyle has seen a widening of the scope for non-traditional uses of land. For example, rainforest plant nurseries have been set up – the experience and expertise for which arose from meeting domestic needs for re-foresting their own properties and expanded into an income-earning job. Increased

¹⁷² Reported in Amanda Kenyon & Luke Maunder, *Lismore Food Processing Business Incubator: Feasibility Study*. http://www.nor.com.au/business/gbec/lismore_food_processing.htm. c1995.

¹⁷³ “Australia’s Non-GE Canola in Demand,” *Nimbin News*, April–May 1999, 16.

¹⁷⁴ See “Canola No Longer GE Free,” *Nimbin News*, February–March 2000, 23.

interest in native timbers and sustainable forestry has seen agri-forestry developing for native plant species, and professional tree-planting operations. An interest in local ecology and health naturally leads some people to an interest in native plant medicines and herbs. Who better to create and take advantage of these kinds of opportunities than people from within the alternative lifestyle community?

Groundbreaking Business Venture in Medicinal Plant Products

The Park, located on 73 hectares of land within the campus of Southern Cross University in Lismore, NSW, will create a 'critical mass' in key areas for research and commercialisation in natural plant products, particularly those which might have a medical application as part of the rapidly growing number of 'complementary' or alternative medicines.

Media Release, Senator Grant Tambling, Federal Minister for Health and Aged Care, 17 June 1999.

The strategic plan for the Cellulose Valley Technology Park in Lismore identified ten popular herb crops with production potential.¹⁷⁵ The herbals on this list have been in wide use among the alternative population in Nimbin for many years. The plan sees an advantage from their being grown in Australia in the stricter control over the growing conditions can be exercised. The strategic plan also reported that worldwide, more money is spent on herbal medicines than on western medicine, that global retail sales of herbal medicine was estimated at US\$14 billion in 1997, and the market is growing at 15% per annum. The growth of the alternative medicine market in Australia is growing at a massive 30% a year.¹⁷⁶

Djanbung Gardens

Djanbung Gardens is a permaculture education centre located in Nimbin, which opened in October 1998. The centre is a demonstration farm combining theory with practice.

¹⁷⁵ They are echinacea, valerian, wild yam, chamomile, skullcap, passionflower, meadowsweet, red clover, dandelion root and gotu kola.

¹⁷⁶ "Cellulose Valley Technology Park," *Nimbin News*, August-September 1999, 30.

The gardens were first planned five years earlier in 1993. At that time such a facility was identified as a priority at the well-attended Nimbin Eco-tourism Conference in 1992. Djanbung gardens are situated on 2 hectares of rural-zoned land at the edge of Nimbin village. Certification in permaculture is compulsory before residents are permitted to grow things on at least one of the communal properties in the area.

The people at Djanbung gardens, like many modern peasants, augment their income with eco-tourism, writing and work-shopping. They cannot depend upon the sale of produce alone. The centre runs workshops and also hosts garden tours twice a week, in addition to visits from other tour groups. They have a commercial kitchen, not only to cater for work-shoppers but also so that surplus garden produce can be made into gourmet conserves, condiments and herbal products. The centre includes office, library and resource centre space. The resource centre is stocked with a specialist range of permaculture and organic-growing literature (books, journals, charts) and sells non-hybridised seeds and cottage products.¹⁷⁷

Like other Nimbin initiatives, this centre shows many of the alternative philosophies in practice. They preferentially used local trades-people, suppliers and materials to construct the building. Educating people to have sustainable lifestyles is a part of what they do – a philosophy they embody in their own lives. Many of the features of this centre further support my argument about “work” arising from the domestic economy, about off-farm income, and about “inhabitation” being primarily what benefit peasants do.

7.4 Land management and exchange of cultural practices

The material facts of life impose a logic of their own. Straight farming practices have changed over time and this has involved a move to more eco-friendly land-use. An increasing market for branded pesticide-free produce has meant that some farmers can

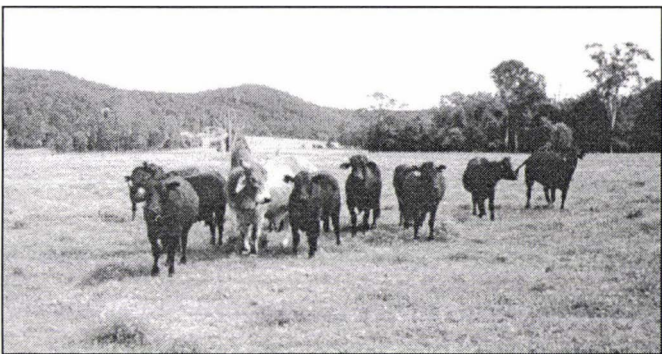
¹⁷⁷ “Permaculture Centre Officially Opens in Nimbin,” *Nimbin News*, October–November 1998.

make a higher profit from using alternative farming methods than from the traditional high-chemical ways of farming. The increasing cost of chemicals in conjunction with improved controls on pesticide residues in farm produce has forced some farmers to change their management practices.

Some of this [organic farming methods] may be familiar ground to you, the intelligentsia of the lifestylers. If you did but know it, you are the people we old style farmers often look to for new ideas, although we rarely admit it. Ideas you can try because you can afford to have a fizzer.¹⁷⁸

Nor' Wester, *Growing Today*, July 1998, 49.

Straight farmers too need to resolve some of the same problems of production and they too want to remain on the land. The innovative, affordable solutions developed by the



Here we see a Brahman bull running with Black Angus cross heifers. Brahman cattle are more drought-resistant than the traditional English-Scottish cattle breeds. Cattle farmers are introducing new genetic material to their stock, a strategy for improving profitability and surviving local climate conditions.
Photo: Ann Hows.

alternative lifestyle participants are within the financial grasp of the local straight farmers. Soil and water conservation, lower use of expensive chemicals, rainforest and wildlife preservation, inexpensive building techniques and materials, and harnessing cheap sources power are all examples of shared concerns.

Also the land didn't look good back then, I mean things have changed a lot in the last twenty years ... attitudes towards land, even your most basic farmer now plants wind-breaks and puts in dams and stuff like that ...

Interview with Micky, October 1997.

The integration of what were previously "alternative" practices and technologies into the mainstream include sustainable and selective logging practices, plus the use of on-site

¹⁷⁸ I don't know why the writer thinks that lifestylers "can afford to have a fizzer," perhaps because their income is smoothed by a benefit?

mobile mills (instead of trucking the logs to the mill with all the associated damage caused by the heavy vehicles on land and roads). Increasingly, straight farmers are putting to use the microclimates on their farms for high-value crops like pecans, lemon grass, and soybeans, and looking to non-traditional sources for livestock more suited to local climate conditions.

Noxious weed control was not seen as a necessary activity by some the early alternative lifestyle participants. For the mainstream farmers, having a pest or weed-infested neighbour means that they have a bigger battle on their hands on their own side of the boundary fence. They also would have seen this kind of thing as negligence by the new owners.

I remember as we were first wandering through that countryside we saw these beautiful flowers and gathered them and put them in a vase, and then we found these beautiful beetles and we were carrying those around and someone came up to us and said, "Oh, crofton weed! Oh, monoliptus beetles!" You know, and it was like, "oh, right ..." [Laughs] So, we didn't know very much. [John Seed.]

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

We planned to reforest the cleared section. Cattle were not part of this picture, so we took them off. In no time, the place was overrun by groundsel bush, a classified noxious weed. I don't know how many other members noticed this happening but I didn't. Although I would have said that I love the land, I hardly paid any attention to what was happening on it. [Jan Tilden.]

Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality*, 1995, 61.

The weed control measures of the time (spraying) lead to another series of battles over the safety of herbicides. A letter written to the Pastures Protection Board by a "conscientious objector," argued that the Board was unethical and further that it used environmentally damaging means (in particular 1080 poison baits and the herbicide 24D) to control pests and weeds that the author argues were introduced by beef farming practices. As a vegetarian (a non-beef producer) the writer, Norm Sheppard, was

refusing to pay the levy.¹⁷⁹ He was still fighting this issue and was looking to set a precedent in 1988.¹⁸⁰

The desire of recent migrants from the city to be closely surrounded by trees is viewed as a naive practice by straight locals who support the local body by-laws that require that there be a certain meterage of cleared space between a dwelling and bush. Experience has shown alternative people that the removal of dry undergrowth is a necessary practice. Burning off is the most common way of doing this.

Our usually distinct weather patterns, wet summer and autumn, dry winter and spring, encourage the use of fire in the early spring as a management tool to clear out areas of long dead grass with very low protein levels. Fresh new shoots quickly appear to help cattle through until the wet weather comes.

[Alternative lifestyle participants] generally don't burn off, though some living at the head of blind valley's with 10 years of accumulated fuel have had deathbed conversions.

Terry Dwyer, Letter, 1985.

Local fire brigades have actively recruited members from the alternative community and regularly review fire safety practices for the benefit of new arrivals. Some intentional communities have developed their own bush-fire brigades and strategies after losing houses (and sometimes people) to fire.¹⁸¹

Fire was a traditional Aboriginal land management tool, and coupled with the knowledge that many native Australian plant species require fire to germinate, the use of fire has been legitimated by many (but by no means all) new settlers. In this we can see a complex interaction between expediency, ideology and ecology.

¹⁷⁹ "Letters," *Nimbin News*, November 1986–February 1987, 3.

¹⁸⁰ See "Landowner Against Pastures Protection Board Charges," *Rainbow News*, March 1988, 31.

¹⁸¹ Interestingly, two draft copies of this thesis were burned in house fires, making it clear to me how big an issue fires safety in rural areas could be.

Burning off is still a contested practice. Some people use other methods of weed and fire control, and are seeking amendment to council regulations governing what is acceptable.¹⁸² Some of the opponents of burning off point to the huge number of bush fires actually started by so-called fire control burn-offs (80-95%) and suggest that people instead lay a 20cm deep mulch.¹⁸³ However, in dry conditions making that much mulch is a major undertaking and requires either a great deal of labour or machinery. Many (especially the less well off alternatives) simply burn off the undergrowth along with the straights because it's a cheap and effective way of doing it. Unlike straights, alternative landowners will not use herbicides.

Either way, the early days of living in among the trees with no bush-fire plan have largely disappeared, and while burning off the undergrowth might not be universally accepted, most of the original alternative lifestyle participants would not contest the need to have clear space around buildings as fire protection, even if that space is not manicured lawn as it tends to be with the straight community.

7.5 Saving the planet – an economic contribution

Ecological work

By simply “inhabiting” the land, letting it recover and encouraging bio-diversity, the alternatives have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars of value to the economy. This is because there is cost involved in environmental degradation and they have helped the land recover very cheaply. Their land management includes care-taking of the land, controlling weeds, fire protection, soil improvement, and both active and passive reforestation.

¹⁸² “Personal thoughts on the burning off controversy,” *Nimbin News*, December 1988–January 1989, 9-10; and “The Burning Question,” *Nimbin News*, October–November 1996, 20.

¹⁸³ “Is ‘Hazard Deduction’ a Fire Hazard?” *Nimbin News*, February–March 1998, 26.

In many ways I think all those dole-bludging hippies that are in the bush sitting around growing their plants and doing very little, even if they're just sitting there watching the land, making sure it doesn't get too ravaged by fires and letting the bush grow back, aren't really doing any harm, and the government is getting really good work out of them at an hourly rate, if you think about it, for what they're doing.

Interview with Micky, October 1997

A new science has been developed, called ecological economics, which seeks to quantify the economic value of ecology. These conservation economists estimate that it would cost US\$33 trillion a year to replace "ecosystem services." These services include climate regulation, fresh water, soil, nitrogen fixing, bio-diversity and crop pollination. Robert Costanza, director of the Institute for Ecological Economics at the University of Maryland, argues that "pricing the biosphere is useful ... because it dramatically illustrates that 'there is a value [to natural systems] even if we aren't paying it in our normal transactions.'",¹⁸⁴

These ideas were prefigured by the alternative lifestyle participants, who have always argued for the inherent worth (value) of natural systems rather than seeing them in more standardised economic ways. For example, they have long lobbied for preserving the rainforest for itself, rather than seeing it as a timber resource "going to waste."

The alternative lifestyle migrants, as a class, are eco-activists. Their inhabitation of the land is a form of land-use that falls into the silent area of land-based work because it is not seen to generate cash income. Yet as the following quotes show, the long-term income from an intact, preserved forest as a tourist attraction or for its contribution to biodiversity can far outweigh the one-off cash income from selling logging rights.

The Kennett Government has been selling off woodchipping rights to Victoria's native forest for **royalties for as little as nine cents a tonne**. The revelation, contained in a document obtained by *The Age* newspaper, helps prove that

¹⁸⁴ "How much is the world worth?"

http://bric/postech.ac.kr/science/97now/97_5now/970514b.htm.

Australian governments are propping up the native forest logging industry at the expense of alternatives such as plantations and recycling.

Nimbin News, April–May 1999, 23. [Emphasis mine.]

Before being declared as world heritage, it was being used for logging, and after being declared as world heritage, it's been used for tourism, and conservation of course. And the overall income from the tourism industry is many times greater than the prior income from logging. [Professor Ralf Buckley.]

Sustainable Tourism, Wish You Were Here, 1998, 3.¹⁸⁵

Work to protect these forests can therefore be seen to have a measurable economic value, and should be seen as part of the contribution made by the alternative lifestyle participants as a class to the Australian economy as a whole. By preserving the forest the



Chaelundi Forest Protest Action, 1991.
Photo: Andy Frame, *Some Children of the Dream* Collection

alternative eco-activists have maintained “eco-system services” that would be expensive to artificially replace.

Ecological work is an important aspect of the alternative culture and has been the economic basis for some of the conflicts with the mainstream.¹⁸⁶ Two years after the Aquarius festival, the

timber industry planned to clear fell what remained of one the local rainforests and to plant a eucalyptus plantation crop. The alternative lifestyle community objected to this and mounted major and successful demonstrations, which were the first anti-logging demonstrations ever held in Australia.

¹⁸⁵ This material was downloaded from <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/learning/tourism.htm>. It was a 13 part Radio National Open Learning course called, “Wish You Were Here: Australian Tourism Studies,” and developed by Monash University, 1998.

¹⁸⁶ Ecological protests will be discussed in greater deal in *CLASS FOR ITSELF*, page 419.

There was a big over-response: thousands of police were sent up here to combat these dangerous hippies. Made a big media splash. They got pretty heavy actually. There were no ground rules, they were still logging the timber in the forest when people were running around, demonstrators were sabotaging the logs of an evening. Eventually a mediator was sent in and they made the first logging rules, no logging on slopes of more than 45 degrees. Then a couple of reserves were named.

Bob McKay, November 1996.

In 1977, the forestry interests were stopped from clear felling at Mount Nardi. This time, the activists were supported by the government, which in 1982 gazetted the area for national parkland. Later the Nightcap National Park was included in the UNESCO World Heritage list and took its place alongside the Grand Canyon, the Serengeti National Park, and Mount Everest. It was, to quote the locals, “an absolute victory.”

World heritage listing represents recognition by the global community if you like, that an individual country has something which is of value to the world as a whole. It's of very special value. [Professor Ralf Buckley.]

Sustainable Tourism, Wish You Were Here, 1998, 11.

It is this ecological consciousness that forms part of the alternative lifestyle's distinctive “otherness” in relation to the straight population. Again, the existence of an area where there is a concentration of active and highly organised environmentalists attracts more environmentally aware people, especially young activists. There has been a steady migration of eco-activists over the period of the alternative settlement of the area.

The entire new settler population seems very environmentally aware and conscious of degradation and destruction.

Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 56.

The big environmental battles around Nimbin to save the Rainforest and to have areas gazetted as national and world heritage parks brought full-on environmentalists to the area. I make this point because the alternative lifestyle settlers migrated to the area for different reasons and got involved in the environmental fights, but some of the greenie migrants came *for* the pro-environmental work. The common relationship they share to the means of production (as benefit peasants) unites their interests and results in joint political action.

Many of the ecological heroes of Nimbin and places like it actually camped in (inhabited) the disputed areas in order to protect them. This wasn't just "write a letter" activism (although that too was done) – this was a lived protest in which their way of life, their job, became ecological protector. The following quote comes from an internet web page description of the Chaelundi Forest Protest Action in 1991.

[E]ventually it was decided that as well as barricades we should place our village on the road. Chaelundi was so dear to us, it had become our home and to destroy it was to destroy our home.

Some Children of the Dream Website.¹⁸⁷

Exporting eco-activism

The skills the alternative settlers had developed, most particularly the knowledge of how to capture and manipulate media coverage, was "exported" to other areas. Flushed with success, these activists assisted at other environmental protests.

It was here in the beautiful remote temperate rainforest wilderness of southwest Tasmania that the spirit of Terania was next expressed. The Franklin River, a vision of whole and unaffected nature, became the scene of the biggest environmental direct action ever to take place in the history of Australia.

Earth First: The Struggle to Save Australia's Rainforest, Gaia Films, c1987.

The battle of Terania Creek went down in history and has been emulated successfully many times since. Seven rainforest remnants in our area were placed on the world heritage list. The awareness we generated rippled out and became a turning point in many of our lives. From Terania Creek people went out all over Australia and the world, to the Franklin River, the Daintree rainforest, to protest nuclear warships and the bomb, to Borneo, the Pacific, South America, Siberia, Bosnia, Tibet and East Timor. Many people whose feet became entangled in mother earth dedicated their lives to her defence ever since. [Voice-over]

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

The alternative lifestyle community, as a class, have been involved in fighting for environmental issues throughout Australia. For example, as well as local actions, they

¹⁸⁷ <http://www.nimbin.net/dream/photo15.htm>

have been at the forefront of environmental actions to protect Kakadu National Park, Fingal, Ocean Shores development, Timbarra, Jabiluka, Fraser Island, Stradbroke Island, Chaelundi Forest, Washpool Forest, Middle Head Beach, Grier's Scrub, Billen Cliffs development, The Daintree Forest, Franklin Dam, and Iron Gates.

Three busloads of protesters went from Nimbin to join the demonstrations against putting a road through the Daintree rainforest. During my May-June 1998 fieldtrip, the Environment Centre in Nimbin was organising for busloads of protestors to go to the Timbarra and Jabiluka blockades.

The Timbarra Café, behind the Nimbin Museum, was run by volunteers and donated its profits to fighting the Timbarra gold mine. These protests are publicised inexpensively on the internet.¹⁸⁸ The Timbarra Protection Coalition are up against big financial interests but their activities obviously sting.

In June 1998 the Ross Mining Company finally got the go-ahead to start a gold mining operation on Timbarra plateau. While the local advertising costs are comparatively low the fact that the gold mining consortium had to place half-page damage-control advertisements in the *Northern Star* shows the effectiveness of the protest raised by low-income activists, and the threat posed by their opposition to resource consents.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ <http://www.gasgroup.com/timbarra>.

¹⁸⁹ "Timbarra gold project gets the green light," *Northern Star*, 2 June 1998, 7. I estimate, from standard Northern Star advertising rates, that this advertisement cost around \$1750 to place: insignificant in terms of the operating budget of such a company but an example of how the company felt it necessary to "manufacture consent" (to use Noam Chomsky's famous phrase) for the mine in the face of opposition from local activists.

Haemorrhaging legal and security costs, dogged by the start-up delays caused by the extended rains and all the while the price of gold plummeting. On the Sydney Stock Exchange, Ross Mining shares dropped from \$2.80 to 43 cents over two years.

Dunstan, *Timbarra and Making the Earth a Garden*, 1999.¹⁹⁰

By February 2000, work at the gold mine had been suspended on account of the fall in gold prices and the complexities created by its Native Title settlement.¹⁹¹

“We will not allow you to poison our land or the water of our children and children’s children,” he [Rusty Harris, Timbarra Protection Coalition spokesperson] said. “We will be a constant witness and persistent presence at your mine perimeters, like so many little fleas under your collar, niggling you, video recording your environmental offences, and constantly challenging the greed and malice that drives you.”

“Our actions will cost Ross Mining a fortune in security, legal and PR costs, but we, the defenders of the environmental rights of future generations, are doing it for love and friendship and because we want to live as if there will be a tomorrow for our children,” he said.

“Timbarra Calling,” *Nimbin News*, February–March 2000, 7.

The list of respondents to the Northern Territory environment the proposed uranium mine at Jabiluka shows how involved Nimbin people are in environmental politics. Of the 85 public respondents from throughout Australia, 47 were from individuals (rather than organisations) and 18 of these were from people around the Nimbin-alternative zone. By comparison only one individual from Sydney (with a population of around 3.7 million persons) made a submission.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ <http://www.nrg.com.au/~graeme/timbarra.htm>

¹⁹¹ “Timbarra Calling,” *Nimbin News*, February–March 2000, 7.

¹⁹² Jabiluka Number 2 Uranium Mine Environmental Impact Statement response list from <http://www.lpe.nt.gov.au/enviro-register/complete-jabear9.htm>. A disastrous cyanide leak from an Australian gold mine operation in Romania in 1999 has further hurt the public image of gold mining companies.



Penan People's Blockade, Sarawak, 1991.
Photo: Andy Frame, Some Children of the Dream Collection

Ecological activists from Nimbin also travelled to Borneo, to Irian Jaya,¹⁹³ and to India to assist with rainforest protection and reforestation. They were also active in opposing BHP's OK Tedi mine in Papua New Guinea.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ "Indonesia: Suharto's Latest Budget is Bad for Irian Jaya's Forest," *Nimbin News*, November-December 1989, 7-8.

¹⁹⁴ "BHP Leaving OK Tedi," *Nimbin News*, December 1999-January 2000, 25.

Chapter 8. Cannabis Cropping

8.0 Introduction

In this chapter I will focus on the conditions in and around Nimbin that made cannabis cropping a more viable form of agriculture here than elsewhere. I argue that this is because Nimbin cannabis growers derive a benefit from the cheaper cost of production under the social conditions in Nimbin. These social conditions include the high proportion of mostly pro-cannabis alternatives, relatively low over-all population densities (compared to cities), publicly owned forestry land and a lower level of drug law enforcement.

8.1 History of cannabis cropping in Nimbin

I think that several processes interacted to encourage the development of cannabis into a cash crop from its previous cultivation for personal use only.

When alternative lifestyle people first moved to the area, many found it hard to get regular paid work or an unemployment benefit.

There was no money except for what you could scrounge from your family, get from growing dope, or you could lie through your teeth and get the dole. [Kali McLaughlin.]

Nimbin News, August–September 1998, 7.

The alternative migrants were city people unfamiliar with market gardening or animal care, the soil on their farms was degraded, they had no money to set up the necessary infrastructure (such as tunnel houses and irrigation systems) or for machinery (like tractors and hoes) for traditional rural enterprises and the market for the standard agricultural and horticultural produce from the area had collapsed. Traditional farming wasn't what the alternatives were there to do, and the depressed market for farmland in the area explains how they could afford to purchase the land in the first place.

For some, cannabis cropping was one of the few ways they could make the money to pay for their land without going back to the city to work. Proceeds from the sale of

cannabis subsidised some of the early land purchases and the building of homes and provided capital for small-scale investment in subsistence agriculture around Nimbin. Consequently, the cannabis growers among the alternative lifestyle migrants played a disproportionate role in settling the area because they could afford to buy land. All of these factors combined to make growing cannabis for sale an attractive option.

When the hippies started out here in the early '70's (no dole then), pot was a cash crop. ... It could help you feed your kids, buy your share in an MO, build your house, register your car.

Prohibition & the Nimbin Experience, Hemp Website.¹⁹⁵

Growing a small cannabis crop also meant that the plot could be cared for as the alternative lifestyle participants went about their ordinary daily business of creating their new lifestyle. Growing cannabis fitted in with building houses, raising children, making gardens and planting trees, in a way that paid employment off their property did not.

There are still a large group of people who live in and around Nimbin and grow a small cannabis crop on the side. Local informants suggest that today maybe half the total amount of cannabis harvested in the area is grown under those conditions, and the majority of the growers are small time.

The growers who participated in this research, however, reveal a profile of domestic entrepreneurs with modest aspirations for an improved quality of life. ... The growers' financial aspirations ... generally ... involved meeting the costs associated with vehicles, homes, children and entertainment.

Carol de Launey, *Commercial Cannabis Crop Growers in Northern NSW*, 1996.¹⁹⁶

The growing of cannabis as a cash crop was a disputed activity among alternative lifestyle participants, even before it became a major part of the town economy. First among the reasons for conflict was the fact it was illegal and made the entire alternative population vulnerable to police actions. Some feared that growing cannabis would

¹⁹⁵ <http://www.nimbin.net/hemp/nimex.htm>

¹⁹⁶ There are no page numbers for this reference because the paper was down-loaded from the internet.

further prejudice the straight community against them and what they were trying to achieve. The commercialisation of cannabis growing wasn't well regarded by some alternative lifestyle people who saw it as "the commercialisation of something cosmic, a gift from mother nature that was meant to be shared." Others saw it as a simple economic necessity because growing cannabis was one of the few ways that they could make enough cash to meet their needs. It also allowed them to "purchase" the right to remain in the area on a benefit by owning land.

8.2 Analysis of cannabis growing and selling in Nimbin

Cannabis growers in Nimbin enjoy the "natural" advantage of a specific social location and growers there can obtain surplus profit or differential rent by growing cannabis in this area. As owners of land, the cannabis croppers can appropriate the surplus profit derived from the differential rent. People who crop cannabis without permission inside the state forests or on other people's land can also appropriate the differential rent.

8.2.1 Cannabis cropping and ground rent

Agricultural products all involve the use of land. The agricultural productivity of land depends on its fertility, what the climate is, where it is located and so on, with the result that different pieces of land are going to produce different amounts of agricultural produce despite the input of equal amounts of labour and capital. Even the land that has the lowest productivity has to obtain a price that is sufficient to cover the costs (including the average rate of profit) of the person who cultivates it.¹⁹⁷ Rent paid on the worst land comprises the absolute rent portion of ground rent at a minimum.

¹⁹⁷ If the land cannot provide absolute rent, it is worthless. We can see in Nimbin the failure of the land to even achieve the minimum level of absolute rent when used for dairying and beef production in the 1970s. This led to the farmers selling (and even abandoning) farms. For the farmers who have debts to the bank, their mortgages can be seen as ground rent that is being paid to the bank.

The other portion of ground rent is called differential rent. Marx identifies two types of differential rent.¹⁹⁸ The first, Type I, derives from the natural fertility of the soil, proximity to markets, climate and so on. Type II differential rent involves increasing amount of capital investment.

A person who cultivates cannabis on favorable land receives a surplus profit which takes the form of differential rent Type I. This differential rent arises from the natural advantages of growing cannabis in the area, not from a difference in the amount of work or money invested in the crop. It is called differential rent because it arises out of the *difference* in productivity between the land in the Nimbin area and the worst land on which cannabis is produced for sale and sold. Unlike more traditional forms of differential rent, in Nimbin differential rent (surplus profit) arises more as a consequence of the difference in the *social* conditions of production than from factors like natural fertility of the soil or climate, although these are adequate.

Differential rent is a constant, and is appropriated by the landowner. The theory of ground rent presupposes that the landowner is not the person farming that land. In the case of Nimbin, the cannabis croppers mostly own the land they plant their crop on. So, as landowners, they appropriate the differential rent. Some non-owner growers appropriate the ground rent of the legal owner (not infrequently the state) because they don't pay for the use of the land they are growing on. The illegality of the crop means that having it on your own land can sometimes be too risky. Cannabis can be grown in small plots in the bush, much of which is publicly owned.

8.2.2 Social factors give Nimbin a competitive advantage

It is the social infrastructure in the Nimbin region that makes it an economical place to grow cannabis.¹⁹⁹ This can be shown by the fact that while Nimbin has an acceptable

¹⁹⁸ Afanasyev, *Political Economy of Capitalism*, 1974, 120.

¹⁹⁹ In Sydney, for example, growers often rent a house, install suitable lighting and heating systems, automatic timers, a hydroponics system and visual screening from outside observers

climate for growing cannabis outdoors, if cannabis was legalised it would quickly move out of the area altogether.²⁰⁰ Legalised, cannabis crops would instead be grown in Queensland and further North and perhaps also in former Australian colonies like Papua New Guinea, where the conditions are more suitable than in NSW.²⁰¹

[T]hough service and tourism bring in a dollar here and there, no-one has ever been under any illusions about what Nimbin really runs on. This is marijuana country, a perfect geographic intersection of climate, landscape and isolation ...

John Farry, "Pot Shots: Dope is Deadly Business in Northern New South Wales," *Australian Penthouse*, July 1997, 36.

If the quoted sentence had read, "a perfect geographic intersection of climate, *social* landscape and isolation," then I think the author would have hit the nail on the head. Given that the physical climate for growing cannabis is better further North, the differential rent for the cannabis crop in Nimbin is primarily a social phenomenon and less a difference in natural (geographical) conditions. It is the social conditions under which cannabis is produced in Nimbin that contribute to the higher productivity, and therefore higher differential rent, obtained in this area. The physical landscape (difficult hilly bush-clad terrain) also makes detection harder, and these little spots in the bush would not be cropped if it were legal.

(because the powerful lights are on for unusually long periods and because the cultivators wish to remain anonymous.) Alternatively, for growers in remote Queensland, where the climatic conditions for growing cannabis are better, the social conditions are less favorable. Their ability to quietly cultivate cannabis and get about their business would be far less – and their ability to sell it would be impaired by their social isolation from a population of potential buyers.

²⁰⁰ Just as the banana growing and dairying industries did, when the conditions of production changed.

²⁰¹ The botanical requirements of cannabis are well studied, and further information on its growing needs are readily available from libraries and off the internet.

These social conditions of production work in much the same way that a manufacturer in an urban area derives benefit from the proximity to markets and other manufacturers, and from the social and physical infrastructure. The cannabis industry likewise derives benefit from proximity to Nimbin. The popular media perception of Nimbin as being a “place to score,” means that marketing the product is free.

And so, reality imitated the media image and it came to pass that those who wanted some of this “drug town” action headed for here.

Prohibition & Nimbin. Hemp Website.²⁰²

One of the main advantages Nimbin has is the relative ineffectiveness of anti-drug law enforcement in the area. The ineffectiveness of policing is due to the social cohesiveness of the alternative lifestyle population as a community and their class relationship to the cannabis crop. An organised but informal network means that early warning can be given when police convoys were sighted.

[I]n Nimbin ... there's quite a bush telegraph that goes on, like, “helicopters are coming,” or “I saw the cops driving past my place in a big convoy heading over your way.” It's a bit obvious, as there's only one road. By the time the cops came, they'd all got warned.

Interview with Micky, October 1997

“[Sgt. Neville Plush] said police still faced problems with locals who were unwilling to come forward with information because they feared reprisals.

“People see a lot of things we don't see and they have to be less tolerant, give us support, give us information, be prepared to make a statement and go to court.

“When they do, we get results.”

“Walking the thin blue line,” *Northern Star*, 11 June 1998.

The anti-drugs laws apply everywhere, and while they work quite well in Sydney at making it expensive and difficult to grow and sell cannabis, those laws work far less well in Nimbin at preventing people from growing cannabis there. For example, in 1995 during the annual “crack-down on drugs” I heard a commotion in the street. When I

²⁰² <http://www.nimbin.net/hemp/nimex.htm>

asked what was going on I was told that someone who had been identified as an undercover policeman was being followed up the street by a person (possibly Bob Hopkins) dressed as a joker beating a drum and blowing a whistle. In this way everyone in town was being warned. It's pretty hard to work undercover in a town like Nimbin with someone following you about blowing a whistle, and everyone was talking about it. During my 1998 field trip the new policeman was introduced to people at a café in a manner ensuring that all the persons nearby would take notice.

Another social advantage of Nimbin as a place to cultivate cannabis was the number of alternative lifestyle participants. At a particular point in Nimbin's history, there was a near-optimum number of alternative lifestyle participants, providing a population density sufficient to provide camouflage but not so high that it was impossible to grow a cannabis crop without being noticed. The alternatives could therefore be said to have a monopoly ownership of the social conditions of production.

This monopoly on the social conditions of production is owned by the alternative lifestyle community as a whole. It resulted from the core-periphery processes that expelled this group of persons from the city to the country. These social conditions of production derive from their participation in a cultural and social movement that has colonised the area. It is by being alternative lifestyle participants they obtain access to the protection of other alternative lifestyle participants – in the sense of having effective camouflage and willing co-conspirators, a conspiracy of silence.

8.2.3 Police actions maintain the price of cannabis

Drug-raids have had several consequences. In the first place, drug raids in Nimbin can push the price of cannabis up overnight. For example, for a couple of days in December 1998 the police cannabis-spotting helicopters were flying over Nimbin: the price of cannabis on the street increased 70% overnight as the availability of the "product" shortened.

[T]he bottom line fact still remains: it's the prohibition laws alone that creates for these plants their grossly inflated market value.

"Small Town Talk from Bob Hopkins," *Nimbin News*, February–March 1997, 8.

Two days after the out-of-town drug squad had left the area, the heroin dealers and users – who had been absent from the street for some months – reappeared on the streets in Nimbin.²⁰³ By effectively increasing the value of cannabis through standard supply and demand mechanisms, the police action had actually resulted in heroin being (relatively) widely available and used. An amount of cannabis worth \$100 on Tuesday could be sold for \$170 on Thursday. This meant that there was a great deal more profit to be made from selling cannabis (for those who had escaped the police action) and those sellers of cannabis who were also users of heroin could now more easily afford to purchase heroin – and where there is a demand, there is usually someone willing to supply.²⁰⁴

8.2.4 Changing social circumstances alter the rate of surplus profit

Land in and around Nimbin became more valuable in part by virtue of being able to produce surplus profit. The price of land has to embody differential rent and in consequence the price of land in Nimbin rose steadily (especially in comparison to other rural land of similar physical merit). However, land prices are now beginning to drop in relative (if not absolute) terms. This is in part due to the downward pressure on the differential rent caused by the changing social conditions in which cannabis is grown in Nimbin.

Over recent years, some growers have moved west of the immediate Nimbin area to escape the high land costs and the constant “predation” on their crops. These growers

²⁰³ A 1998 “clean-up” of the drugs scene had meant that there were far fewer heroin users in the town – they had either moved away (I recognised several of them at one of the coastal towns when I was staying there) or had stopped using for a time due to the fact it had become difficult and dangerous to buy and use drugs in Nimbin.

²⁰⁴ This trend continued into mid-1999. Michael Balderstone commented that, “It’s absolutely ridiculous with street cannabis prices rising steadily since Christmas, while I hear that heroin is almost half the price of this time last year, and of higher quality.” Again, we see the problems of policing the drug laws. “View From The Street,” *Nimbin News*, April–May 1999, 3.

have invested in technology to overcome the deficiencies of the land they are now growing on (it is more prone to frost and drought), while taking advantage of the other merits of their new land: that it's inexpensive, it's still warm enough to grow cannabis outside, it is in an isolated region of low over-all population where larger crops can be grown, yet it is still relatively near to Nimbin.

Even the marijuana you're offered for sale out there is likely to have come in from somewhere else these days.

Prohibition & Nimbin. Hemp Website.²⁰⁵

Another advantage of moving out of Nimbin is that more of the agricultural enterprise can be mechanised. Around Nimbin growers often have to carry fertiliser, seed, and even water into a remote area with difficult access. The disadvantages of the new area are overcome by investing in more equipment such as remotely timed irrigation systems from water tankers. Bigger crops are put in which allows for economy of scale.

And there just aren't the people out here. [West of Nimbin.] I can grow plants out here in places I wouldn't dare grow out in Nimbin, because if the cops didn't get them, they'd get ripped off. I'm a lot more blatant here: I'll plant bigger patches, and make them more obvious because there's a lot less chance of them coming looking for them.

Anonymous interview, May 1998.

I know people out here that have patches in the bush [...] they've got a truck with a tank on the back with a pump, go to the dam, pump the water up into the tank, drive to the road that runs half a k above their patch, feed out the 400 metres of collapsible piping, it collapses down so it's thin, down the hill to the patch, inflate the pipe, pump the tank water down the hill to the automatic timer, sprinkling system in the patch, doing it really high-tech. There's room out here to do that, you just couldn't get away with that around Nimbin.

Anonymous interview, October 1997.

The surplus profit from these enterprises can be considered from the point of view of differential rent Type II. It is still more profitable than growing cannabis elsewhere, but

²⁰⁵ <http://www.nimbin.net/hemp/nimex.htm>

repeated investment in the land makes it different from the more simple differential rent Type I in which the land is “naturally” more profitable.

Some growers have remained in the Nimbin area, and have invested more time and money in crop protection to protect their income. This means smaller plots spread out more widely, shade and camouflage cloth to protect from aerial surveillance, and growing their crops in even more inaccessible and unpleasant places, hidden in bush infested with leeches and snakes and stinging trees.²⁰⁶ Sometimes, too, the growers install anti-theft devices, such as trip wires, bullet mines, shotgun traps, concealed gin-traps and other deterrents. This extra capital investment provides an increase in Type II differential rent for those growers.

8.2.5 Crisis of policing

I have argued that the high proportion of alternative lifestyle participants living in the Nimbin area limits the effectiveness of anti-drug law enforcement and hence increases the ground rent (or price of land) for the growing of cannabis crops. However, as the number of people rises and the cannabis industry consolidates, a countervailing tendency has emerged. This is the high incidence of cannabis crop theft and other anti-social behaviour.

There are a lot of people growing a little bit. But there are no big plantations—there are too many people trying to rip each other off to have any large quantities out there—too much intense surveillance.

Interview with Bob McKay, December 1996.

This means that the social pressure for more policing comes to decrease the ground rent, because the social advantage of growing in Nimbin is lessened by lower security of the crop itself, a lessened social tolerance to cannabis growers and more policing of the drug laws.

²⁰⁶ John Farry, “Pot Shots: Dope is Deadly Business in Northern New South Wales,” *Australian Penthouse*, July 1997, 38.

The cannabis growers who were interviewed spoke of repeated crop thefts and very high personal risk. Risks include detection and arrest, violent armed robberies, and problems with unpaid credit, unreliable partners, and the vagaries of growing crops. Invisible harm included unreported violent crime, alienation from the legal system, the possibility for corruption, and widespread fear.

de Launey, *Commercial Cannabis Crop Growers in Northern NSW*, 1996.

Another negative effect of the pressure on crops is the paranoia that results from that kind of social environment. Not only do local and outside people steal crops, but



cropping partners can be untrustworthy, the police can find and destroy crops and so on. This can generate an unhealthy atmosphere in the community.

The present legal and social environment in which this agricultural product is grown leads to secrecy and individualised (peasant-style) production. At the same time, paradoxically, the marketing and distribution of cannabis requires a high level of

socialising between the producers of cannabis and the persons to whom they sell it.²⁰⁷

There is a need for security that leads to secrecy and powerful in-group socialisation and boundary maintenance.

Despite the police claiming in the media that they had the support of the locals for their anti-drugs operations, generally speaking people in Nimbin don't approve of the police harassment of cannabis growers and users in their community. Carol de Launey did a random survey of 40 households in the area to test the claim that the police had the support of locals and found that: –

[W]hile only one third of households (35%) were personally disturbed by police activities against cannabis growers, two thirds (67%) did not approve of these operations. A volunteer sample of 29 residents of multiple occupancies ('communes')

²⁰⁷ Most cannabis sales are not "wholesale" amounts, but essentially the retailing of an ounce or half an ounce to people they know.

in the area indicated that 83% were personally disturbed, and 94% did not support the police operations.

de Launey, *Commercial Cannabis Crop Growers in Northern NSW*, 1996, 5.

Quite a few alternative people don't like the influence that heroin has on the town and say that the police were invited to the town in the belief that they would clean up the heroin scene. Instead the police were arresting people for small amounts of cannabis, apparently blind to the *obvious* heroin-runners in their hired cars driving in from the Gold Coast, making a major profit and driving out again. It appeared to be a hippie-bashing exercise rather than a genuine attempt to deal with the heroin problem and so caused a furore.

The normalcy of cannabis use by this group as a whole is demonstrated by the outrage of residents arrested for possession of small amounts of cannabis on their way home from anti-drugs meetings in Nimbin. "But I've just come from the meeting *against* drugs," they complained. "Drugs," in this cultural context, did not include cannabis, but only narcotics. This echoes mainstream people not seeing their normal daily drugs – caffeine, alcohol and tobacco – as "drugs."

The failure of the Police to control the heroin scene gave rise to the "vigilante scene." Some of the Nimbin youth became fed-up with the heroin trade in Nimbin and took it upon themselves to scare the users away, especially the people that one described as "out-of-town junkies coming here and fucking us around." They started off water-bombing people, but it became more serious and they bashed a few people up, and ordered outsiders to leave town. These days the young people in Nimbin demand that outsiders "respect our town."²⁰⁸

The increasing pressure on cannabis crop growers by police and drug-thieves has resulted in a decrease in the amount of differential rent. In other words, there has been a drop in the amount of surplus-profit that can be made using the "natural advantages" of

²⁰⁸ "Nimbin's kids ask for a town without junkies," *Northern Star*, 8 June 1998, 7.

Nimbin as a place to grow cannabis for sale. The growers need police more, and can make use of them less. This also informs the demand for legalisation.²⁰⁹

8.3 Marketing the crop

The constant high value of the cannabis crop is another advantage it enjoys over other forms of horticulture, the value of which can fluctuate more.

Unlike other crops grown in the area, cannabis is easy to transport. A kilo of cannabis can be taken to its market in someone's shoulder bag: it would take many kilos of green beans (also grown in the area) to equal the value of that kilo of cannabis. The travel and accommodation expenses in getting their produce to market were usually low – hitchhiking or taking a train, then staying with friends or at the Sydney squats. Later, of course, the market started coming to Nimbin.²¹⁰

The sale of all kinds of drugs in Nimbin has a different flavour than in the cities because the small rural town and the alternative lifestyle culture have imposed certain restrictions on the sale of drugs. Firstly, instead of being a night-time activity as it is in the city, drugs are generally sold in Nimbin during the day. This is because of the distinctive requirements of rural alternative life.

Nimbin is quite bizarre in the scoring scene: it happens in the morning. I mean in the country it's generally like that. People get up early, get out to their dope and want to get home and chop wood, light fires and all that stuff I suppose. It always used to be, if you missed Nimbin by four o'clock in the afternoon it was too late, it was all over. Where, you know, in Sydney most of the dealers ... a lot of them don't wake up until eleven, a lot of them not until four ... So yeah, Nimbin always used to be safe if you got there after the evening, the smack would be off the street so it would just be this quiet little country town with tumbleweed blowing down the streets.

Interview with Iona, June 1998.

²⁰⁹ See CLASS FOR ITSELF, page 419.

²¹⁰ State-wide rail transport was subsidised (by 50% in the mid-1980s) for beneficiaries, so that the price of a train ticket to Sydney was affordable.

This person was talking mainly about the sale of heroin in Nimbin. I expect that the tourism industry in Nimbin will cause a change to this pattern of morning drug selling. Already the village is open on Sundays to cater to the weekend travellers and on “bus nights” some of the eateries in town stay open later to provide for the tourists off the bus. Cannabis sellers are certainly still in town in the evenings, but, by and large, other drugs are not in evidence because the visitors on the tour-bus are not generally interested.

Most cannabis marketing takes place through informal social networks: as first-generation migrants the alternative lifestyle group retained strong links with the city.²¹¹ These social links between the city and the alternative migrants meant that the Nimbin growers had easy access to a market for their produce.

8.3.1 Ritual cannabis sales transactions

With larger cannabis transactions there is often a great deal of socialising associated with the sale. Being an illegal activity you could expect that they’d want the transaction to be over and done with in the shortest possible time. Instead people engage in drawn-out social interactions – there is a lot of sitting around, having a chat over a cup of tea or a beer, smoking a joint together and so on – before the sale is transacted.

These interactions establish the other person in the transaction as another human being, rather than a category, “buyer” or “seller.” And if you betray them, you do so to an individual that you know as a person (and hence you’re aware of the personal consequences of your actions) rather than it being an anonymous action with unseen consequences. The high level of interaction has to do with the *kind* of transactions involved in the sale of cannabis and this is because the commodity being marketed is illegal.

²¹¹ This informal social-network marketing is in contrast to the marketing of “straight” farm produce, where the farmer has no direct links to their market, and the transport and sale of their produce is managed through a local agency of a wholesaler.

If you're busted on the street with a deal bag, that's one thing. It's bad luck and all that, but it's not personal and the Police are just doing their job. But when people are arranging bigger deals, they come into your house, and present themselves as reliable, partake of your hospitality as friends or family—and what is so very offensive about this if they rip you off is the sense of betrayal, of being sold out—that's why narks are so reviled. They've established a personal link, they know you as human beings, pretended to be your friend, and been befriended by you—and it turns out your trust and liking of them was misplaced, and you have made yourself vulnerable to someone who turns out to be your enemy.

Interview with Reg, August 1998.

In a banking transaction, for example, there is no need for a contract to be negotiated because both parties are already agreed about what takes place and who is responsible, and those contractual arrangements are enshrined in the business model. While the fine detail of that contract might not be exactly known to the bank user in a legal sense, its terms are felt to be well understood by both parties, and many of these elements are implicit in the rather stylised interactions.

Even though cannabis is a commodity that can be bought or sold by anyone on the street, the trade in cannabis (and other drugs) is illegal. Therefore there is constantly something that needs to be negotiated: there are things about the quality, delivery arrangements and about security that have to be negotiated each time. And the illegal nature of the trade makes this very difficult to consolidate into a formal business ritual. In transactions that are not enshrined in legal ritual, an agreement needs to be formed.

These rituals not infrequently involve the buyer “sampling the product.” This also helps build up an atmosphere of trust as well as providing a means of checking quality before purchase.²¹¹ It is difficult to maintain a convincing “front” over an extended period of

²¹¹ With heroin, it can be a matter of safety. If you overdose, the dealer will look after you, because it's a major hassle for them if you die.

time, and relaxing (hospitality) leads to a dropping of your guard, allowing you to be evaluated by your prospective business partner.²¹³

If the pot is poor quality, and you don't know the person who has sold it to you, you're fucked. You can't complain to the standards authority.

Interview with Reg, August 1998.

Also, drugs police are supposed to feign drug usage.²¹⁴ A person who wasn't behaving appropriately (not inhaling for example) would come under suspicion. Inexperienced cannabis users and anyone behaving oddly would also become obvious during these "hospitality rituals," which are part of a mutual evaluation process.²¹⁵

The social control that other members of the group can bring to bear on someone whose commitment is somehow suspect is a significant marker of "insider" and "outsider." In the following excerpt from an interview, the person suspected of "dobbing" recounted how they had been angrily confronted, encouraged to take responsibility for the (assumed) act of informing, and offered a rational solution (the instruction to withdraw the statement they had allegedly made). Finally the dispute led to mutual rejection and social isolation.

[B]asically what they were saying was, "We know that you dobbed us in, all you've got to do is admit it and withdraw anything you said."

²¹³ This parallels straight society where typically, the "business lunch" is part of a negotiation process, and gives each of the parties time to evaluate the other as a partner in the transaction, to be reassured about the other person and their intentions. This is one of the reasons summit meetings always include a banquet.

²¹⁴ In practice impossible to achieve, hence the number of habituated and addicted police claiming compensation.

²¹⁵ Also, as some people experience mild paranoia as a consequence of smoking pot, it is supposed that they might betray their intentions over a joint and prolonged interaction. In that case the seller can withdraw from the deal, at worst only being arrested for possession of a small amount of cannabis rather than being charged with supplying an illegal drug.

I was amazed, I mean I was absolutely amazed that they could even believe that I had done that and I denied it and there were various fucking responses—Mary being really up-front and angry, aggressive, and Seth going, “It’s all right, you just have to fucken do this,” and me eventually just denying it all. ... Well so anyway they left, but they didn’t believe me and there became a period of estrangement ...

Anonymous interview.

Also, the higher up the chain you go, the higher the stakes are as a consequence of betrayal. So this social convention among drug users is strictly enforced at every level of interaction – a culture of mutual safety. Coming down on your head for a minor violation of the rules of conduct is really a warning, a lesson, about the probable consequences of ripping people off or informing on them. It’s a gradation, starting with the low-level petit bourgeois free-trading milieu in which the small retail operation exists, to the more intermediate forms of overt and quite ritualised pacification gestures, and the gross, authoritarian hierarchy that takes place inside big-time drugs syndicates.

Other drugs

Drug users are often involved in these small town social and economic processes either as customers or sellers. You might be a seller one day and a dealer the next. This also imposes certain restrictions on people’s behaviour. The sale of drugs is influenced by the fact of Nimbin being a small-town where everyone knows who you are and by the fact that you also share with those people a commitment to a different kind of lifestyle from the dog-eat-dog life of the cities.

We were ... yeah ... we were very conscious, being New Age smack dealers, of ... I mean ... just business conscious, we were selling, living in a very small rural area, not even a town, lots of users around us, didn’t want to get people off side, tried to be generous to at least one person each time we got on, gave mates rates to our friends, go to Nimbin to make a profit and still be doing a good deal, so it’s possible for it to come out as a win-win situation for a while, but it’s very hard to deal smack and for it to keep coming out in profit if you are also a user.

Anonymous interview.

There has been a recent change (in the early 1990s) from locals buying and selling drugs to each other, to outsiders coming to town (mostly from the Gold Coast). This big-

business addition to the drug scene means that bigger amounts of cannabis are being sold in a single transaction, and that heroin and other “harder” drugs are being bought and sold on the street. This has changed people’s attitudes to the “scene.” Like other aspects of the drug scene in Nimbin, this has changed as more outsiders get involved in the industry.

And then, I remember what I thought was a major change in the scene was dealers started coming from outside Nimbin or outside the scene. They weren’t people from inside the scene, users who took up dealing. They were people that came to Nimbin because it was an easier place to deal than on the streets of the Gold Coast.

Interview with Iona, October 1997.

The drug scene in Nimbin, despite occasional breakdowns, is very “orderly.” There is very little inter-personal street violence towards people outside the scene. Users of other drugs can usually sustain their usage by selling cannabis to tourists and are less likely to turn to (other kinds of) crime.

I always used to say that the hippies were the best-behaved junkies ... probably in the world. They could make their money out of selling a bag of grass, and they were pretty sure of it, they didn’t have to get desperate. There was no street crime, no-one got mugged.

Interview with Cass, November 1997.

We’re just sitting in the park trying to make a living. I’d never break into your house or commit a crime. [Interview with “Greg,” a cannabis seller/heroin user.]

“It’s business as usual,” *Northern Star*, 8 June 1998, 7.

I have not included a full discussion of heroin in this chapter. This is mainly because opiates are not produced for sale in Nimbin, and the wholesale trade is managed elsewhere. The heroin these days mostly arrives in town from the Gold Coast and the money obtained by selling it is immediately taken out of the town. The users themselves don’t make a significant contribution to the town except perhaps as cannabis sellers, which has already been covered. The use of heroin is more a political and social issue than a source of revenue for the Nimbin economy.

8.3.2 Growing social acceptance of marijuana use

There is a large and growing market for the cannabis crop. In a 1993 National Household Drug Survey nearly two million Australians *admitted* to using cannabis over the previous twelve months.²¹⁶ Given that the respondents are reporting using an illegal substance, it is likely that there are many more unreported users who are unwilling to openly confess to a crime.²¹⁷ This is a major industry that is estimated at being worth more than \$3 billion dollars a year.²¹⁸

Research conducted at the University of Western Australia shows that alcohol consumption (represented in dollar terms) is dropping by about the same amount that cannabis consumption is rising. In their *Economics of Marijuana Consumption* report, the authors found that –

Australians are turning away from beer, wine and other types of alcohol and now spend an estimated \$3.25 billion a year on marijuana, according to a University of Western Australia study. ...

It amounts to 1 percent of Australia's Gross Domestic Product, the equivalent of \$351 per capita.

Copyright (c) 1999 Agence France-Press²¹⁹

The annual Mardi Grass festival can be seen as the annual trade fair for the local cannabis industry. This explains why Mardi Grass can be a roaring commercial success

²¹⁶ Quoted in Carol de Launey, *Commercial Cannabis Crop Growers in Northern NSW*, 1996.

²¹⁷ The researchers were only asking people 14 years and over, so they will have missed quite a few juvenile users.

²¹⁸ “Robert Marks (1995) recently estimated a market of almost \$3 billion per annum, based on one and three quarter million regular and occasional cannabis users.” Carol de Launey, *Commercial Cannabis Crop Growers in Northern NSW*, 1996.

²¹⁹ <http://www.nandorimes.com>

and the shopkeepers don't seem to get much more money than usual.²²⁰ This is a significant indicator of the importance of the festival as a marijuana sales outlet. The Visions of Nimbin festival also produced (and realised) expectations that people would be able to buy cannabis there. In the year that pot was believed not to be widely available (on account of aggressive policing) many people decided not to come.

Nimbin is a small village with an international reputation for alternative lifestyles and cannabis marketing. In part, the 'green economy' has helped reverse the economic decline of areas like Nimbin.

de Launey, *Commercial Cannabis Crop Growers in Northern NSW*, 1996.

The income brought into the Nimbin economy by the cannabis crop has been one of the main factors that kept the town going. Here I refer to both cash brought directly into the town by cannabis growers, and also the boost to the economy that has come from the tourism industry, attracted by the alternative lifestyle and the (perception of) ready availability of drugs.

8.4 Likely trajectory if cannabis is legalised

The core-periphery processes that influence this industry are clear. The alternative lifestyle migrants didn't just bring the urban practice of recreational drug use to the area, but the links established and maintained with the city have meant that Nimbin has ceased to be effectively remote from the urban centre. This influenced land values, forcing them up as demand for rural properties increased, as alternative lifestyle migrants were attracted to a cluster of like-minded persons, and for some, as the differential rent obtainable from their land by virtue of it being in the Nimbin area increased.

The legalisation of cannabis would have a major affect on the local economy. The income from the sale of cannabis constitutes a significant percentage of the cash flow through the local economy. While it is not inevitable, I think that as soon as the

²²⁰ See TOURISM: Festivals, page 287.

necessary conditions for appropriation by the big bourgeoisie of this industry were to be met – full legalisation of cannabis – then the peasant farmer would be squeezed out of the production and sale of cannabis by bourgeois interests in the form of agribusiness capital.²²¹ Cannabis can be grown on a huge scale (and indeed has been in the past) as a mono-crop and all the economies of scale and mechanisation of the business would easily out-strip the ability of the benefit peasant to produce an economically competitive crop.

A fixed minimum of efficiency in all labour is therefore assumed.

Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, 307.

I suggest that the less efficient, peasant-style cropping of cannabis will persist only as long as cannabis production remains illegal. After that the efficiencies of capitalism will far outstrip the ability of the alternative peasant cropper to compete. It is only on account of the differential rent from the cannabis crop and their cheaper semi-subsistence lifestyle (which can absorb the inefficiencies of their labour) that cannabis remains a significant contributor to the income of the alternative lifestyle population taken as a class. The peasant mode of production also imposes “upper limits” on the success of the cannabis-growing enterprises and would become subordinated to standard agri-capitalist production as soon as legally practicable.

However, it might well be that the only strong interests behind the legalisation process are dope-growers and smokers. If this is so, then it will be their interests that shape the modified legal regime.²²²

²²¹ This agribusiness capital will become the fraction that actually calls the shots in the Nimbin area after legalisation. They will do so remotely, because their farms will be in Queensland. They will influence the future trajectory of Nimbin as a drug and tourism town, as they will be in charge of determining the price of Nimbin’s main crop.

²²² The politically active alternative lifestyle participants are not demanding full legalisation of cannabis cultivation and use, but decriminalisation. Generally speaking they too perceive full legalisation as a threat to their income by bourgeois interests.

There are opportunities for small scale cultivation and marketing of psychoactive cannabis in appropriate rural areas. A cannabis cottage industry may provide an alternative in rural areas where there is a traditional local cannabis market, high unemployment, and few job opportunities aside from an expanding tourist sector. There is some evidence to support the attraction of cannabis cultivation and marketing for economically disadvantaged people in the Northern Rivers region, for example.

de Launey, *Commercial Cannabis Crop Growers in Northern NSW*, 1996.

I think that the suggestion that the cannabis industry in Australia be controlled in the manner of the Netherlands is a good one. A semi-legal cannabis industry, untaxed by the state, would still cost the state money to police. If it was semi-legalised the growers could take the “risk” and therefore appropriate the higher profit for growing and selling it, and the buyer wouldn’t get in trouble for having smokeable quantities of cannabis on their person. The real question is what will happen then? I suspect that the industry would not survive as a cottage industry in the hands of domestic growers. It seems to me that at the point when legalisation is actually on the agenda or after it has been legalised in some form, bourgeois interests will want to get their hands on the crop. The big drug companies don’t want to fight the battles of removing the social stigma and persecution of cannabis users, but once that’s been done, they’ll certainly want any money that can be made out of it.¹³³ After all, how many people grow their own tobacco these days? Generally speaking users of tobacco rely on big multinational companies to oversee the growing, selecting and blending, manufacturing into cigarettes and sale of this drug.

The capitalist farmers would also be able to extract more use-value out of the crop, using more of the plant for other purposes. For instance, the fibre can be used for textiles, paper, building materials, and in the manufacture of automotive parts and so on. Hemp oil is valuable for the cosmetic industry, as a foodstuff, and in technical products such as paints and vanishes, as a lubricant and for fuel.¹³⁴ At that point, too, the hemp industry would “migrate” to a more suitable location. I predict that after legalisation

¹³³ This is what happened after alcohol prohibition was repealed.

¹³⁴ *Industrial Hemp*, 1995, 25.

cannabis will be grown further North where there is already a substantial industry. The Queensland Criminal Justice Commission Advisory Committee on Illicit Drugs estimated that around 71 tonnes of cannabis was cultivated each year in Queensland alone. The Advisory Committee reported a conservative estimate of the profit in the Australian cannabis market as close to two thousand million dollars in 1989.²²⁵

²²⁵ Carol de Launey, *Commercial Cannabis Crop Growers in Northern NSW*, 1996.

SECTION IV: VALUE-ADDED WORK

Introduction to Value-Added Work

This section deals with ways of earning a living on the land that are secondary to inhabitation, but are dependent upon the existence of the alternative lifestyle class that has migrated to Nimbin. These are tourism, computing, and research and development work, which I have called “value-added work.”

While Nimbin is located in a beautiful spot, the unique selling feature of Nimbin is the presence of the alternative population living there. The emergence of a research and development and a computing industry is likewise directly related to the number of highly educated and motivated members of the alternative population.

Chapter 9. Tourism

9.0 Introduction

This chapter looks at the effect of both the media and of improved transport linkage on the development of Nimbin as a tourism destination. I look at the costs of hosting tourists – in terms of infrastructure investment and in terms of cultural and political costs, and what they entail for the town.

Tourism results in a distortion of the local economy, which proves to be an impediment to a balanced, healthy community. I look at how the people there have attempted to keep control over the way in which tourism is developed in the Nimbin area, how the Nimbin community has resisted some core influences and inverted or subverted them.

I examine the way in which the development of a location as a tourist destination imposes certain restrictions on that community, and look at the economic, cultural and political impacts of tourism, and how tourism throws up new challenges to this counter-cultural community. I will point to how changing economic interests (expressed as values) have emerged as more people rely on tourism for their income in Nimbin.



The rainforest brings in a sustainable income far greater than the trees would have fetched as timber. By preserving the rainforest, the alternative lifestyle activists have made a significant contribution to the local economy. This photo was taken from a picnic area at Brindle Creek in the Lamington National Park.

Photo: Brendan Tuohy.

Tourism in Nimbin

Nimbin is situated amongst three stunningly beautiful and easily accessible National Parks. By protecting the environment, the alternative lifestyle community actions have conserved a world-class natural attraction from the loggers, and now tourists are being attracted there.²²⁶ However, the real attraction is “Nimbin, the hippie town,” rather than Nimbin as a location in the centre of a magnificent environment.²²⁷ The existence of the alternative lifestyle is what gives Nimbin its unique selling point. As Micky notes in the following quote, by the 1980s tourism had become an important aspect of Nimbin’s economy.

By that stage they were bringing buses of tourists through town, who stopped and had a look at Nimbin. Backpacker hostels on the coast do day-trips out in a minibus and stuff like that. Nimbin is on the tourist map and also the rainforest the hippies fought to save are now world heritage sub-tropical rainforests and one of the easiest places to get into them is [via] The Channon or Nimbin. ...

So tourism is a big thing. Drug tourism but also hippie tourism—come and have a look at the freaks, have a look at the pretty painted buildings, watch the kids on the street with flowers in their hair and all that.

Interview with Micky, October 1997

By the late 1980s tour buses were coming through the area, but few of these tourists actually stayed overnight. Nimbin was more of a refreshment stop and an opportunity to wander around for an hour or so in the village. Even now, the visitors who do stay overnight in Nimbin tend to be more self-reliant – willing to self-drive, backpackers and hitchhikers – and are generally more willing to rough it. This, of course, impacts upon the type of support the tourist industry in Nimbin needs to provide to these travellers.

²²⁶ Professor of Ecotourism, Ralf Buckley, comments that a world heritage listing comes with a “tourism mandate,” and that part of the environment gains world recognition as being valuable and worthwhile. It therefore generates international interest in seeing it, which means a new conflict arises between preservation and making it available to people to visit. *Wish You Were Here: Sustainable Tourism*, 1998, 11.

²²⁷ The hippie town attraction includes the opportunity to consume drugs for some visitors.

This is changing rapidly and there has been a growth in the middle-market sector recently.

The Lismore City Council has seen economic possibilities in “selling” Nimbin as a tourist spot. Since the mid-1980s the Lismore City Council has dropped its promotional slogan, “Summerland” and has instead adopted “The Rainbow Region.”²²⁸ This reflects an acceptance of the alternative community and their role in creating the World Heritage Parks in the area. The council has invested in the infrastructure by upgrading the roads into Nimbin to cope with the increased traffic.²²⁹ Money was granted for the refurbishment of the town murals in Nimbin, and for street planting and beautification. A car park has been built to cope with congestion on the main street, and a sewage system installed.

The larger nearby town of Lismore, which oversees Nimbin and the other small villages of the area, while more conservative by nature, has seen the potential of Nimbin’s unique character and plans to advertise it as a tourist attraction.

Evening Post, 7 March 1994.

Nimbin has attracted the attention of travel writers, and their opinions of the town demonstrate many core-periphery processes. Nimbin is one of the “must see” destinations in the influential *Lonely Planet* backpacker’s handbook and it refers to Nimbin as a place where you can see hippies and buy cannabis. There is no mention of any of the ways of life that this community has developed. The Oz Experience Company website similarly offers a shallow picture of Nimbin and feigns outrage over drug use. Here is their “introduction” to Nimbin.

[We] then travel inland through the hinterland to Nimbin, possibly the NSW capital of the alternative and hippie lifestyle and the venue for the annual “Aquarius

²²⁸ “Post Aquarius, Summerland became the Rainbow Region.” “Commemorating Aquarius – 25 Years On,” *Nimbin News*, April–May 1998, 3.

²²⁹ The previous shocking state of the roads was a deterrent to travellers and a perennial issue for locals.

Festival.”²³⁰ Walking around the town you’ll see lots of painted murals and street art. Don’t be surprised if you are approached and asked to buy some “smokin’ gear.” We strongly advise that you do not partake in this evil substance, what’s the youth of today coming to!

Oz Experience Website.²³¹

It is through the media that many of the target tourist groups are selected or repelled. The travel industry “markets” a destination as a particular kind of place. This “framing” is important for the way in which tourism-dependent economies are projected to the world: there must be a match between the type of services available and the expectations of the visitor. A failure to capture the right market will mean that tourism will be less successful than it could be.

9.1 Transport and accommodation

The accessibility of Nimbin as a destination is a primary factor its development as a tourist destination. Since the beginning of the Aquarian migration to the Northern Rivers area in the 1970s there has been a steady improvement in transport links to the area. The New England and Pacific highways have increased the linkage between Queensland and the Lismore hinterland. The improvement in transport links between New South Wales and Queensland’s Gold Coast (the ribbon development of the coastal strip between Brisbane and the New South Wales border) has had a significant effect on the development of Nimbin. The encroachment of the Gold Coast tourist strip triggered a change in the pattern of tourism, with more tourists coming across the state border on day trips from Queensland. This is important because transport and communication linkages are an aspect of the penetration of the more central areas into the periphery.

²³⁰ Factually incorrect. The Aquarius Festival is not an “annual event” as claimed. The Aquarius Festival happened in 1973. There have been two commemorations since, on the 20th and 25th anniversaries of the original event. I expect that they have become confused with Mardi Grass, which became an annual even after its inception in 1993.

²³¹ <http://www.ozexperience.com/>

The lack of airline connections between the international airports at Brisbane and the Gold Coast (in Queensland) with the Lismore and Casino airports (in NSW) reduces the number of international tourists travelling to Nimbin from across the border. At the present it appears there are few wealthy international tourists, and those who do visit are more likely to visit Nimbin on a day-trip from the more salubrious Gold Coast than stay overnight in the village. In a standard core-periphery manner, this means that the bigger centres attract the major income from the wealthier tourists – high-value accommodation, main meals and so on, while small places like Nimbin provide the “entertainment” at little cost to these bigger centres.²³² The Lismore City Council pays the increased cost of roading, and for the provision of public amenities like car parks, rubbish collection and public toilets in Nimbin, but the major tourist dollars are spent in the Gold Coast.

Tourism impacts upon how the transport system works, and is itself heavily influenced by the transport system. For instance, to get to Brisbane from Lismore by coach you travel via the Gold Coast (another tourist attraction) rather than by the more direct New England highway route or via Beaudesert. Nimbin is situated off the main road, and it’s a 30km detour to get to Nimbin from any of the bigger towns nearby, such as Murwillumbah, Casino or Kyogle, or from Lismore city. The nearest rail links are at Murwillumbah and Casino. Transport between Nimbin and other centres is by school and commuter buses which do not necessarily travel either at a time of day or in a direction to suit tourists who are dependent upon public transport.

For example, to link with the bus service going between Lismore and Brisbane, you have to backtrack to Lismore on the commuter bus (which comes from Murwillumbah via Nimbin), rather than intercept the bus at Murwillumbah, because there is no direct service from Nimbin to Murwillumbah in the afternoon. During the weekends, there is neither the school nor commuter bus.

²³² And less still if those bigger towns are across a state border.

9.1.1 Back-packer attraction

International tourism to Nimbin (and the region in general) tends towards the lower-spending back-packer market. However, the large number of international back-packer tourists means they comprise a significant portion of the total income from tourism in Australia. Bob McKay, who runs a tourism venture in Nimbin, said that studies have shown that the pack-backer tourist is vastly more significant in economic terms than popularly believed. This is because while back-packers do not spend so much money in any given day, they tend to stay much longer than the average tourist, are relatively cheap to host, and are more willing to get off the main tourist routes.

New government regulations have led to a recent significant drop in the number of back-packer tourists. In 1996 the number of working permits for UK visitors alone was cut by half from 60,000 to 30,000. This was causing concern to people whose livelihood now depends on the tourist dollar. Despite their relatively independent investment in the tourist business, it shows how they are still vulnerable to changes made by forces (external governmental agencies) outside of Nimbin.

Back-packer tourism is more strongly influenced by travel connections than you might expect. Factors such as which way the tour buses are travelling and when they get to Nimbin influence how much money these people have to spend when they get there. Back-packer tourists tend to fly into Sydney and travel North – with time and cash on their side. By the time they are heading back south, they've already spent most of their money and they have greater time pressures. They have already seen rainforests and beautiful white sand beaches, so it is the presence of a large and identifiable community of alternative lifestyle participants draws them to Nimbin. Nimbin caters well for this tourist clientele, being suited to the backpackers' more casual style.

[O]ne day an "Oz Experience Bus" found us when Byron Bay was full. The driver loved it and it didn't take many more experimental buses before they decided to put Nimbin permanently on the southbound Cairns to Sydney run, overnighing at Granny's [Farm Youth Hostel.] ...

These buses have been coming through for almost 2 years but now they have newer buses, more per week (4 at present) and more people on them. This is expected to increase. Not many elect to stay over [more than the one night] probably because

Byron Bay is the next place and as the bus leaves late morning we only get the people who can get up early to do the tour. [Bob McKay.]

“Home Grown Tourism,” *Nimbin News*, April-May 1998, 28.

During the summer tourist season of 1998-99 there were five Oz Experience buses a week. An influx of up to 75 back-packer tourists five nights a week makes a big impact on the social and economic dynamics of a town with a population of just over 300 people. In addition, around 50 people a day come from the nearby coastal towns on day-trips.



This picture shows the footpath outside the Nimbin Museum. Local people (in the foreground) are using the space differently from the tourist with the ice-block, the daypack and his hand in his shorts pocket.

Photo: Ben Rotteveel.

The back-packer groups are mostly young, and this too brings with it social costs. On holiday and out for a good time, they can be noisy, disruptive, irresponsible and are unconcerned that people actually live in Nimbin (whilst they are passing through). When, day after day, tourists arrive with these attitudes, they can have a significant effect on the area.

9.1.3 Drug Tourism

The black-market sale of pot to tourists is another way in which the economy of Nimbin has been skewed and it has provided the material base for the proliferation of other kinds of drug sales and use, particularly heroin. The image of Nimbin portrayed in the media tells every junkie where they can buy drugs, and do so relatively easily, quickly and safely.

The media attention given to Nimbin as a place to score drugs is seen by many people as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The fact remains that Nimbin is somewhere you can get drugs easily and the sale of cannabis to tourists is one of the most economically significant and obvious industries in town. Drug-users and sellers come to Nimbin for a reason, and the reason is that it is successful: tourists do buy drugs. I've witnessed back-packer tourists, who have moved on to the coastal town of Byron Bay, return to Nimbin on day-trips to buy pot. This is not because there is no cannabis in Byron, it's just more evidently available in Nimbin and they've already met a supplier.

"Nimbin is such an internationally-known name there is a ready market for drugs with all the tourists." [Interview with Sgt. Neville Plush, Nimbin Police.]

"Walking the thin blue line," *Northern Star*, 11 June 1998.

There was a really steady stream of people that would come through town every day—the touros—specifically coming for drug tourism [...] About drug tourism, I mean Nimbin's famous—I've spoken to backpackers from various places around the world that came to Nimbin because they'd heard about the scene there, very much the capital, at different times, of the freak movement of Australia, Australasia, even South East Asia. I've heard of backpackers who'd heard of Nimbin on the trail through Asia and that, in the eighties, and came specifically for what they'd heard, for the drug tourism, to come to the Rainbow Café, where it was renowned you could score.

Interview with Alex, October 1997.

For many tourists, one of the attractions is that cannabis is easily available and smoking cannabis is part of the "Nimbin experience," and it is part of what makes Nimbin different from other places they visit. The annual Mardi Grass Hemp Festival attracts many tourists who come because of the availability of cannabis.

The Mardi Grass is now one of Eastern Australia's classic underground events. Despite minimal advertising or promotional publicity, we've always attracted big crowds, earned strong support and received wide and comprehensive media coverage. [We receive] constant demands for information and accommodation bookings from all over Australia.

Hemp Website.²³³

Many of the heroin users in Nimbin sell cannabis to tourists to support their habits. Based on information from the police and from the Department of Health, conservative estimates are that \$4.1 million in illegal drug money flows through the village each year. Nimbin's heroin trade is big business, and the locals get little benefit from that trade.²³⁴

[A]t the bottom line it's the trade in cannabis that has created, finances and underpins the situation we have here and it's the drug-buying tourist who supports and maintains this drug trade status quo. [Bob Hopkins.]

"Nimbin at Crossroads," *Northern Star*, 30 December 1997, 8.

Partial legalisation of cannabis use could benefit Nimbin. For example, the establishment of "green cafes" would change the street scene by making the sale of cannabis in small amounts subject to the control of the state, rather than black-market entrepreneurs. It could also help control the heroin trade.

The village infrastructure – for instance the Hall, the parks, the pavements and streets, the hospital, the public toilets and all their combined maintenance costs – receive no share of what is a huge financial through-put carried out within this precinct. ...

²³³ <http://www.nimbin.net/hemp>

²³⁴ "It's business as usual," *Northern Star*, 8 June, 1998, 7.

We'd like to see marijuana sold openly in cafes like in the Netherlands. Where customers can inspect at ease what's on offer and make a relaxed purchase decision instead of the rushed surreptitious deals of the street. Where a tax on sales is paid to support local amenities, to assist promote accurate and appropriate drug education, and help provide local counselling and rehabilitation services.

Hemp Website.²³⁵

A number of cafes in the north coast of NSW would be interested in becoming 'green cafes', including three in Nimbin. ... There is a lot of legal money to be made from small scale cannabis marketing, and a great deal of it would remain in the local community.

de Launey, *Commercial Cannabis Crop Growers in Northern NSW*, 1996.

It would certainly help contain the "leakage" of money earned locally from tourists to the big drug syndicates in the cities. It would help keep the money earned in Nimbin, in Nimbin. As a legal, therefore, taxable commodity, cannabis could help put something back into the town.

9.2 Tourism distorts economy

The commodification of alternative culture for sale to the outside world (the creation of the tourist package, the alternative experience) is confronting the alternative lifestyle.

Localities that are dependent on tourism become economically constrained, and having a tourism industry can distort the shape of a town. Political compromises can occur, and people with heavy investments in the tourism infrastructure may become a powerful lobby group. Developments can become sensitive to the perceived needs of the "target" tourist consumer, rather than the needs of the people who reside there. A certain amount of cultural sanitation takes place. There is pressure to hide the less attractive aspects of life from visitors, as tourism businesses are vulnerable to adverse publicity. The changing material interests of the "hip capitalists" were believed to be instrumental in one of the drugs crackdowns (El Dockin) which led to the first Hemp Rally in Nimbin.

²³⁵ <http://www.nimbin.net/hemp.nimex.htm>.

Also, there can be a loss of control on the movement of people and money, the movement of which can be dominated by forces outside of the area.

Tourist dollars, at best a fragile basis for economic sufficiency, have come to dominate and provide a mainstay for the village economy leaving us with the absurdity of eight cafes and restaurants serving a population of two or three thousand people.

Low profitability basics such as food production and the provision of low-cost shelter are still minority concerns in a culture fixated on personal comfort and gain. [Bob Hopkins.]

“On to the Millenium,” *Nimbin News*, December 1998–January 1999, 3.

When a village has so much of its economy geared to the tourist market it is in danger of creating itself as a tourist enclave and of no longer meeting the needs of its residents. The distortion in the development of the town can be demonstrated by the fact that while Nimbin has seen a proliferation of some types of businesses and services, others, like a library, basic clothing and shoe stores, and a supermarket, are absent. These simple material facts – measured in the number of cafes, craft shops and visitor beds – demonstrate how the gearing of the economy to capture the tourist dollar can upset the normal growth of the town. Another consequence of the influx of moneyed tourists is increasing prices. Having a large tourist population drives up prices for locals. As a former leaseholder of the Rainbow Café said, “We rely on the tourist trade because the local people don’t have a lot of money.”²³⁶

Likewise, there are several shops that cater almost purely for the tourist trade.²³⁷ The Nimbin Craft gallery and the Nimbin Art gallery (attached to the Nimbin School of Arts) are also geared to the tourist market. Most of the other businesses in town also have something for sale that is attractive to the tourist market – for example, the Organic Greengrocer has at various times also sold astrological and aboriginal calendars,

²³⁶ “Thugs on street damage business,” *Northern Star*, 21 March 1998, Front page.

²³⁷ In this category I would include Phantom Possum, Wild Skins, Fashionating and Susukka Trading (all in the clothing-textile trade) on account of price.

cosmetics and scented oils, candles, postcards, hemp-fabric vests and silver celtic-design jewelry in addition to its core business. The bookshop also provides more services and sells more objects than simply new and second-hand books.

Rick's café displays pottery, fabric art and tee-shirts. The Environment centre helps promote and fund its activities through its shop, staffed by volunteers. Nimbin Connexions, the local travel bookings office, also sells local craft.

There are eight places advertising accommodation in or near the village.²³⁸ There are many more places offering accommodation within a 15-20 minutes radius, including a number of home-stay operations. The quality ranges from very basic, through to the more upper-middle market accommodation available at Klassic Lodge. In 1998 permission was being sought from the council to build more accommodation.²³⁹ The council have also made bed and breakfast licences easier to obtain, which will also impact on the availability of tourist accommodation.²⁴⁰ This is likely to effect the integration of the alternative settlers into the wider community, as more straight people would benefit from having them in the area. The alternatives have become a resource – “our hippies” – and they provide local colour and ethnic crafts for visitors. Tourists can make life more interesting too, and bring people from all over the world with different ideas, different cultures, and different visions.

²³⁸ Granny's Farm Youth Hostel, Freemason's Hotel, Klassic Lodge, Grey Gum Lodge, Abode of Peace Motel, Calurla Caravan and Camping Park, Nimbin Caravan Park and the Rainbow Retreat.

²³⁹ A 70-bed hostel at the end of Cecil Street is proposed, and also a camping ground-caravan park on Stoney Chure Road. Bob McKay, “Home Grown Tourism,” *Nimbin News*, April-May 1998, 28.

²⁴⁰ There is potential for locals to benefit from the presence of a large alternative lifestyle population by offering home-stay, bed and breakfast accommodation to tourists. Previously setting up a home-stay operation had been expensive, and required, amongst other things,

There is increased sensitisation (in the sense of “what will they think of us” and how best to meet the needs of tourists) to the requirements and opinions of the target visitor group. The competition for tourists has become more intense and the perceived market has widened to include more family tourists, rather than back-packers and independent travellers. This has led to pressures to tone down some of the aspects of the town – for cultural sanitation – particularly concerning the drug scene.

Bob McKay suggests that tourism is not working for most of the businesses in the village, and points to the negative consequences of Nimbin’s reputation as the “drug capital” of Australia.²⁴¹ Yet clearly, at another level, tourism *is* working for Nimbin: the massive growth in tourism-related businesses attests to this. A typically easy-going counter-cultural response to criticisms of Nimbin’s drug scene comes from Michael Balderstone, who remarked, “Really, compared to getting off a bus in an Asian tourist spot, Nimbin’s scene is genteel. We don’t really have much to complain about. It is just very public in Nimbin – honest really – and it is good for people to see reality.”²⁴² As one Nimbin resident commented at a public meeting to discuss the problem of drugs in the town: —

There’s been a lot said about the street scene in Nimbin, there’s been a lot said about the opposition of the business people to the street scene. Now I think that the street scene is what brings tourists to Nimbin, and a lot of business people in this town rely on tourists for their income.

Sects. Drugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

Moreover, many local businesses (both straight and alternative) rely on the income brought into the area by the alternative lifestyle – not just income from the residents, but from the many visitors who are attracted to the area because of the presence of a large

the owner install illuminated exit signs over the doors, smoke alarms, and to pave the parking area with bitumen. Some of these rules have recently been relaxed.

²⁴¹ Bob McKay. “Home Grown Tourism,” *Nimbin News*, April–May 1998, 28.

²⁴² “Radical reform,” *Northern Star*, 9 June 1998, 8.

alternative lifestyle community. This kind of criticism fails to take into account that without the original migration of the alternative community to Nimbin, with cultural traditions of environmental awareness and of drug use, Nimbin would never have arisen as a tourism destination in the first place. Kevin Soward argues that Nimbin's natural beauty would have attracted tourists.²⁴³

Kevin Soward disagrees with the perception that Nimbin was nothing until the Aquarians arrived.

"In the 1970's the area was in the midst of a rural depression but it was always going to recover because of its natural tourist attractions," he said.

"Local Views," *Northern Star*, 10 June 1998, 8.

I think he is mistaken because this doesn't acknowledge that without the alternative lifestyle population, many of the "natural" attractions would have been destroyed. It was the environmental work that the alternative lifestyle population did that saved the rainforest, and their politicisation of environmental issues that had the forests gazetted as world heritage.²⁴⁴ Without them, these natural wonders would not be as they are now. Besides, trees alone would not have created Nimbin as a tourist destination: it was the uniqueness of the alternative lifestyle village that gives Nimbin the edge over its competition from other beautiful North Coast locations, and it is these unique aspects of Nimbin that make it to the promotional material.

9.2.1 Culture as a commodity

One of the major cultural and economic effects of tourism is that the local culture becomes a commodity. Nimbin is packaged and presented as "Nimbin the hippie town." For example, the Development Control Plan for Nimbin has among its objectives:

²⁴³ Kevin Soward is a long-time straight Nimbin resident. He is vice-president of the Nimbin Chamber of Commerce, president of the Nimbin Ratepayers and Progress Association, and of the Nimbin rural fire service, on the committee for the new Neighbourhood Centre and is involved in the Nimbin Community Development Association.

²⁴⁴ See the chapter, *CLASS FOR ITSELF*, page 419.

Retain the “unique product” retailing advantage of the village by ensuring that the new development enhances these marketing opportunities.

Lismore City Council Development Control Plan No. 9, Village of Nimbin, Addenda.

The alternative culture in Nimbin becomes another “commodity” and is marketed and sold to visitors. This cannot help but distort the manner in which a culture develops, because any change in the cultural milieu is seen as a dilution of the “real” culture, and as a result, providing the tourists with an inferior product. Tourists feel “ripped off” and complain because their visitor experience wasn’t what they expected or had “purchased.” Healthy cultural development becomes more difficult under these circumstances.

This small village is the heart of the new age/old hippie movement in the area.

While it is not unusual for a town to have a section of its shopping centre dedicated to new age causes such as alternative medicine, health foods and eastern philosophies, Nimbin is completely dedicated to the cause. Even its petrol station-garage is festooned with new age symbolism. ...

Since [the 1973 Aquarian Festival] Nimbin has continued on its new age way, ignoring the materialistic 80s, and its more typically Australian neighbours nearby. ... Unless you are on the same wavelength as the locals however, you do tend to feel like one of those tourists that used to drive through the hippie Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco in 1967.

Evening Post, 7 March 1994.

The above quote implies that the alternative culture in Nimbin has remained more or less the same since 1973. However the culture has undergone many transformations and for that some criticise “the movement” for having sold out. Such accusations are an example of how expectations can be generated by the media that bear little relation to the dynamic alternative lifestyle culture. Even by the early 1980s the back-to-the-land, self-sufficiency model was too simple to be meaningful.

[A guy that picked me up hitch-hiking to Nimbin in 1982 complained:] “You know, they used to come here and milk the cows everyday and all that. Now they make the effort to get into the car and drive into town and buy a litre of milk.”

Interview with Micky, October 1997.

To some extent people present themselves as they think tourists want to see them, and more, they know the role they are supposed to play. Tourists require the locals to fulfil these roles in order that their “visitor experience” fulfils their expectations. While Bob McKay wrote in an article for *Nimbin News*, “but, thank God, no big hippie theme park yet!” it is my opinion that the entire town of Nimbin is the hippie theme park. I often get the impression that visitors witness the “communal dance” on a grand scale while visiting Nimbin.²⁴⁵ There is a sense that many people participate in a social drama to portray Nimbin as a certain type of place, that the village streets are a “cultural stage” on which this performance is enacted.²⁴⁶ Metcalf reported,

Abrams and McCulloch (1976:14) ... suggested that “visitors do provide an audience for whose benefit commune members can perform a consensual account of the commune, developing their own solidarity in the course of producing the performance.” ...

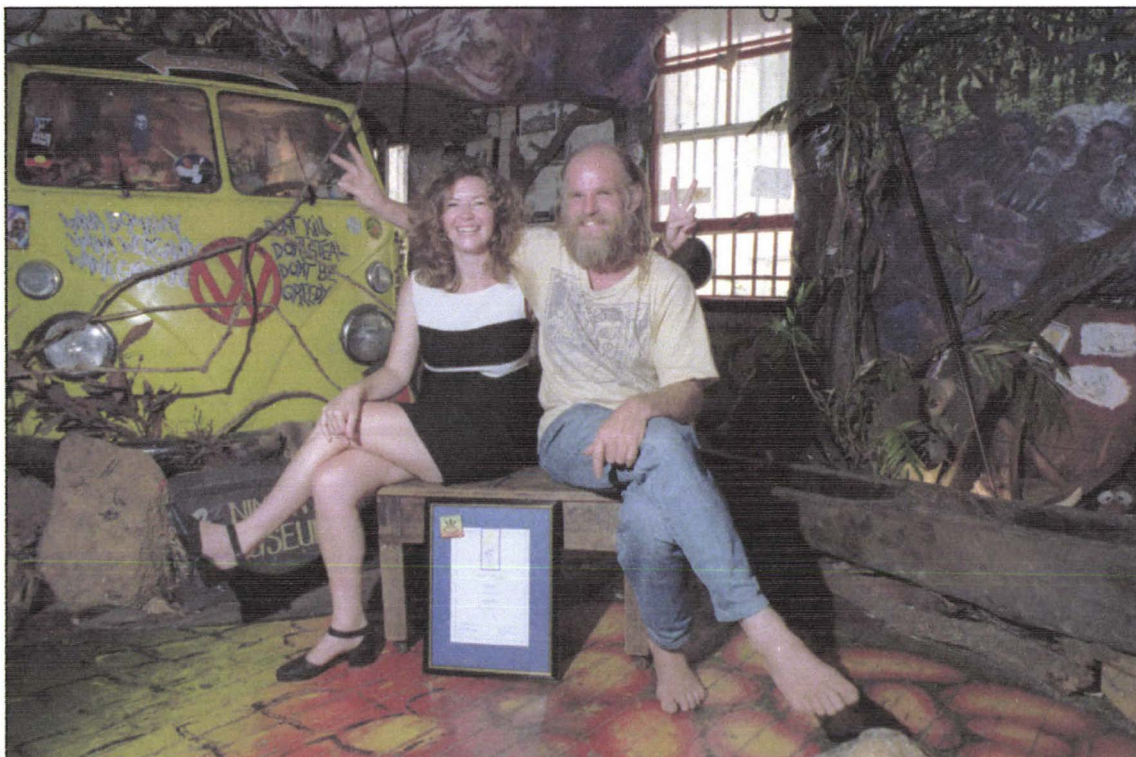
If the communal dance is performed frequently and convincingly, the effect may well be to make the staged illusion the new social reality. This would appear to have happened with groups such as Findhorn who have a constant stream of visitors (and researchers) coming to look at them. What may one day be an affected show may the next day become, through repetition, the new social reality.

Metcalf, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986, Section 2.7, 43.

I think it is possible that Nimbin both suffers and benefits by this “communal dance” phenomenon. The constant reminders of how to behave comprise both positive and negative rewards for acting in certain ways. There is pressure, both external (from tourists) and internal (from locals) to continue to maintain the cultural priorities that made the Nimbin community unique. Market days and festivals also contribute to this ritual reinforcement of the cultural values of the alternative community.

²⁴⁵ “Home Grown Tourism,” *Nimbin News*, April–May 1998, 28. For a discussion of the “communal dance” phenomena, see Metcalf, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986, Section 2.7, 38.

²⁴⁶ This is not to say that everyone participates, or participates willingly and consciously.



Nimbin Museum wins the heritage and cultural tourism category prize in North Coast tourism awards. Pictured are university student Donna Aboody (co-opted to prepare the award submission because "hippies are not very good at filling out forms") and curator, Michael Balderstone. The claim that "hippies aren't very good at filling out forms" is self-parody: Michael Balderstone is an ex-stockbroker and I'm sure that he could do so. The question is, then, whether or not he can be bothered. Photo: Northern Star.

Another positive spin-off from tourism in Nimbin is that it has generated a desire to protect and preserve the local Aquarian history and culture, for example, the Nimbin Museum. The museum is a fine example of Nimbin catering to the tourist trade on Nimbin's own terms, surviving on donations from the 150 or so visitors it gets each day. The Nimbin Museum won the heritage and cultural tourism category at the annual "North'wards" ceremony in 1998.²⁴⁷

9.2.3 Rainbow Café – A Case Study

Nationally and internationally, the Rainbow Café is one of the touchstones for the Aquarius festival, and has been an icon for a generation of alternatives. Locally, the Rainbow Café is a Nimbin institution. There is a common aphorism in Nimbin that the

²⁴⁷ "Free Nimbin museum is a winner," *Northern Star*, 9 April 1998.

Rainbow mirrors the health of the village. When the Rainbow is doing well, so too Nimbin is a good place to be. When the Rainbow is in crisis, then there is likely to be social unrest in the village. Like other businesses in Nimbin, the history of the Rainbow Café shows it is involved in a constant struggle, forced to compromise between the needs and demands of both the locals and tourists, and its fortunes over the years make a good case study.

The Rainbow Café first opened to provide food for workers preparing the site for the Aquarius Festival and to feed people attending the festival. Later the café was acquired by the Tunttable Falls Co-operative. Then the space was wide open, with cushions on the floor. Later, long tables with pews were installed. It was a comfortable and sociable place.

[O]ften you'd go in there and there would be three or four people, a couple playing chess, maybe someone playing the guitar, very relaxed you know. It didn't really have to make a profit, or it made its money ... out of meals in the evenings, and breakfasts and that, but a lot of the time it was just a drop-in centre. It was Tunttable's house in town as much as anything. That was its original [purpose]—it was a service, not a profit-making venture.

Interview with Micky, October 1997

When I first visited in winter of 1984 there were still long tables, a monstrous black potbelly stove in the middle of the room belting out heat, no tourists to speak of and an easy-going atmosphere. The fire was kept stoked by the people nearest it, people were playing cards, someone was playing a guitar and kids ran around under foot. Food was served at the counter, and the cuisine was mostly Indian-style vegetarian.²⁴⁸

Much later, new management attempted to change the Rainbow Café into a more attractive venue for the straighter and wealthier tourist market. This included a change to a more up-market waited table service in the early 1990s. It didn't work and the café closed for a time.

[They were] trying to compete with the other eleven restaurants and eateries up and down the street, which is crazy. Because the Rainbow is always going to attract a totally different clientele. ...

Interview with Micky, October 1997

Some people suggest that the closing of the Rainbow Café meant that much of the drug scene that had previously been kept “in-house” was acted out in view of outsiders on the street.

The Rainbow is such an institution that when they closed ... it ... changed the Nimbin scene in two ways. [First, the] Rainbow was a safe place to deal. ... [Second] even if someone went off and there was a retribution scene going on, inside the Rainbow there's only freaks in there anyway. In closing down the Rainbow, a lot of that stuff moved to the street, because no one else would have 'em.

Interview with Iona, October 1997.

In June 1998 local people were talking about the Rainbow Café having again just closed down. Their analysis was that the Café was still trying to attract the wrong clientele for its business. One of the Rainbow Cafés critics complained that it was “out of towners trying to manage the place and turn it into a yuppie café not a hippie place, and they got too heavy on the dealers.” This illustrates the tension between what the locals wanted and what the tourists wanted, and in the end it failed to meet the needs of either group. More importantly, it shows that the Rainbow Café was such an institution it could not successfully reinvent itself because it was felt to belong to the local people and to be there for them. This was shown in the reaction that followed publication of criticism of local kids by the café leaseholders.

Thugs on street damage business

Nimbin businesses are fed up with the street thugs scaring away customers. The owners of Nimbin's Rainbow Café say they are losing the lucrative tourist trade because youths selling drugs on their doorstep are intimidating and driving the

¹⁴⁸ A former Rainbow Café worker said that in the late 1980s they used to make \$1000 on every morning and afternoon shifts during summer, and around \$500 during winter.

tourists away. Mr [Andrew] Millar, who has owned the cafe for 10 months, says the lost tourist trade is costing his business up to \$300 a day. ... “I know these kids, like many locals, feel the Rainbow is theirs and they own a piece of it.”

Northern Star, 21 March 1998, Front page. [Emphasis mine.]

From what I have been able to gather, the “thugs” appellation was a product of the headlining editorial policy of the *Northern Star*, and not Andrew Miller. With this choice of words, the *Northern Star* betrayed its anti-Nimbin bias yet again and did the lessees of the café no favours either.



The windows of the Rainbow Café were painted police colours (silver and blue check) in a graffiti protest against a hostile article published in the mainstream local paper, the *Northern Star*.
Photo: *Northern Star*.

This complaint about the youths on the Nimbin streets prompted a graffiti protest that was described by a hostile press as “vandalism” despite the fact no permanent damage was done.²⁴⁹ The lead-glass windows in the front of the Rainbow Café were sprayed the

²⁴⁹ “Rainbow sprayed police colours,” *Northern Star*, 28 March 1998.

blue-and-white checkerboard design used by the Australian police. It was an extremely effective protest, using the well-known police icon to get the point across.

It looks likely that the café at the new community centre will develop as a neutral venue for locals. It has the advantages of being a bit off the main street and not all that easy for a casual visitor to find, of being owned by the community, and of it being their own space and not geared to the expectations of visitors. Consequently, the prices there are lower too. I expect that for some it will become the “lounge room” that replaces the Rainbow, a place where locals can congregate without being on display to the curious eyes of the visitors to the town.

I’ve sat in the Rainbow when the last of the tourists and the dealers left, and someone goes, “Hey, it’s just the locals.” Hey, it’s back to the lounge-room. The Rainbow used to feel like that for me, it was just like my big lounge-room that I could go and blob in and see who was home today, you know.

Interview with Micky, October 1998.

By December 1998, the Rainbow Café had reopened. Its major clientele appeared to be the very adolescents who were “disrupting” the running of the place earlier in the year, and most of the workers there also seem to fit this age group. The editorial of the *Nimbin News* that month also makes mention of this.

But what next? Pinball and pool in the Rainbow Café! Has our oldest Aquarian eating house come to this? Perhaps it’s all to the good as it keeps the young ’uns off the street.

Nimbin News, December 1998–January 1999, 2.

The current leaseholders have installed pinball machines, pool tables and video games in the main room, which are well used. A throng of adolescents still congregate outside the café too, but at least they’re not “driving” away custom rather, they attract other persons of the same age and interests. The back veranda and garden area of the Rainbow café is still used by the old guard and by tourists who have “heard about the place.” Perhaps this is finally a happy accommodation of acquiring the right clientele for the style of the café, and its “ownership” being re-established with the local alternative population.

Due to a dispute with a former leaseholder, evicted by the owners the Tuntable Falls Co-operative, several years ago, the ownership of the Rainbow Café is likely to change in the near future. In a confidential out-of-court settlement, the Tuntable Falls community is required to compensate the evicted lessee for loss of earnings.²⁵⁰

I cannot give any details here as there is a non-disclosure clause in effect, but what I can mention is that if the [Tuntable community] tribe decides to sell the Rainbow Café (possibly our only option) to pay the settlement, then maybe “the wider community” might be able to buy it as a community facility: as it has been for so many years. But it will mean more fundraising and there may not be much time.

“Gloria’s Rave,” *Nimbin News*, December 1999–January 2000, 35.

The Tuntable Falls Co-operative were forced to take out a loan to cover this compensation and in a ballot of members 82% have recommended that the Rainbow Café be sold to cover the loan of several thousand dollars.²⁵¹ What remains to be seen is whether or not the local community can organise and sustain another “defence” of the central business district properties to keep it in alternative ownership.

9.3 Independence

The relative independence of the Nimbin tourism “industry” from core economy investors can be demonstrated by my experience with the official Australian tourism bureau, the “Aussie Helpline.” When I asked about tourism in Nimbin, I was told that “We leave it up to them to provide information and they haven’t bothered.” The brochures produced by the Australian Tourism Board show only large hotel chains and major attractions. The kind of tourism that has developed in Nimbin doesn’t fit the Board’s model of tourism – it is not highly enough capitalised and serves the wrong market. Similarly, the NSW Tourism desk at Kingsford Smith Airport in Sydney had no information on Nimbin.

²⁵⁰ “Gloria’s Rave,” *Nimbin News*, December 1999–January 2000, 35.

²⁵¹ “Gloria’s Rave,” *Nimbin News*, February–March 2000, 35.

It is important that Nimbin acquires the “right kind” of niche-market tourist and develops an appropriate and sustainable tourist infrastructure.²⁵³ To a large extent this depends on how Nimbin is “framed” as a tourist attraction. This influences the people who come to visit, what they expect, how they behave and what they want to do when they are there. The promotion of Nimbin is partially dependent upon how the mass media portray the town. The Nimbin community is not in a good position to restrict and control how Nimbin is presented to the wider public in the major newspapers and on national television.

An increasingly important channel for tourism advertising is the internet.²⁵⁴ As you would expect from highly educated, articulate and creative people, Nimbin has a big presence on the net.²⁵⁴ The internet has the advantages of being beyond the editorial control of the major tourism and media capitalists, and the Nimbin people are able to portray themselves in their own words. The web is readily available world over and Nimbin can obtain access to this global audience with ease. It is likely that the internet will help select a more “suitable” tourist market and lessen the problems of dissatisfied customers. They will be able to read people’s accounts of their visits to Nimbin and decide whether they want to visit. Internet users will be able to select accommodation

²⁵³ Kings Cross, for example, has never suffered a lack of visitors for being “notorious” and it plays to its market, rather than to the “families” market.

²⁵³ “Radical change in the tourist experience has been brought about [by] the internet. It’s revolutionised our ability to find out about new destinations and even throws out some challenges to the humble travel agent.” *Wish You Were Here: The Tourist Experience*, 1998, 14.

²⁵⁴ This point is picked up again in RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT WORK: Computer-based work, page 319.

appropriate to their needs and to their budget by inspecting potential places to stay before leaving home.²⁵⁵

The fact that most of the tourism ventures in the Nimbin area are owned and operated by locals is another way in which the alternative lifestyle community has resisted outside capital and the take-over and exploitation of their culture by outsiders. By owning the tourist facilities themselves, they have control over the way in which their lifestyle is presented to other people. It is a more intimate experience and you get to know people as individuals, rather than the impersonal “consumption” of large-scale capitalist tourism ventures. The Reid’s, for example, offer homestay accommodation and visitors can either pay the ordinary rate, or they can “join in” with the daily life of their hosts and help with the garden. In this way they get a better understanding of the alternative lifestyle, rather than simply have “home” away from home.

Some parts of the town are resolutely alternative, subject to the will of the “community” and not of individuals. The Nimbin community owns the Media centre (which houses the Environment Centre, the Apothecary, and Birth and Beyond), the Tomato Sauce Building (from which the Folk Club, Community Club, Youth Club, Hemp Embassy and other organisations operate and have operated), and Sunrise Cottage (formerly the Community School), the Rainbow Café, and the Neighborhood Centre. Now, too, the Nimbin Community Trust owns the former school site in the centre of the town, which has become the Community Centre. These non-commercial, non-individual properties show that the “community spirit” in Nimbin has a material base. The shared ownership of much of the central business district means that it is harder for outsiders to take control of Nimbin.

²⁵⁵ See the Reid’s home at Jarlanbah, *PRODUCTIVE CORE OF THE “HIPPIE NATION:” Architecture & Décor*, page 398

He [Bob Hopkins] says what keeps the 'fragile flickering flame' alive is a sense of community unique to Nimbin. ... We've always had the advantage of collectively owning the CBD property. "

Good Vibes," *Northern Star*, 12 June 1998, 8.

The community spirit in Nimbin is evidenced in the high level of shared responsibility and sense of autonomy among many of the residents. It means that they have some control over how the developments of their village will occur. Their joint, inalienable ownership of the material base of this industry gives them far more say than other local populations in a tourist area.



The building in Nimbin's main street, known to locals as "The Tomato Sauce," has been home to many alternative organizations over the years. The mural on its façade bears the slogan, *Think Globally - Act Locally*. Photo: Andi Islinger.

In nearby Byron Bay, the central business district was owned by the petit bourgeoisie (rather than community owned) and people and businesses with desirable private properties were offered huge amounts of money to sell their properties when the tourist industry arrived. However, property that is owned by community groups cannot be easily alienated, and this has slowed the penetration of the tourism industry and capital in general, into Nimbin.

The local National Party boys have been saying that the hippies are causing the North Coast's dreadful employment record. **Environmentalists and protestors are scaring off developers.** Not a bad claim to fame! [Michael Balderstone.]

"View From The Street," *Nimbin News*, April–May 1999, 3. [Emphasis mine.]

The community spirit, a consequence of the concentration of alternative migrants in the area, also means that the crass commercial arm of tourist capital will be opposed. The alternative lifestyle population in the Rainbow area are active in opposing various developments, and this too may discourage potential outside investors.²⁵⁶ The "community" successfully opposed the Club Med development at Byron Bay, with huge financial costs to the development company, and the Ocean Shores development was also vigorously challenged. These developments were dubbed, "Club Dread" and "Open Sores," in a typically creative alternative "re-branding of the product." Rather than spend huge amounts of money dealing with legal challenges, delays, and adverse publicity, it is usually easier to develop somewhere else.²⁵⁷ Again, we see a partial inversion of standard core-periphery patterns in Nimbin as small local interests successfully challenge the day over large core corporations.

While there is an unusually large number of workers who are not fully employed living in the area they tend not to be attracted to jobs in the tourist industry. They also tend not to support "jobs at any price," and are likely to oppose large-scale tourist developments. Consequently the mainstream tourism industry finds it relatively hard to recruit workers from within communities like Nimbin. Forced recruitment (through state agencies) is expensive for the industry, as workers attained this way tend to be unreliable and resentful.

The service industry requires the alienation of emotional labour – the "hope you have a nice day" and a smile – is required of workers in the hospitality industry. Waiters are performing personal services when their bosses require them to say, "Have a nice day,"

²⁵⁶ See *Wish You Were Here: The Battle for Local Control*, 1997.

²⁵⁷ This political activity will also be covered in *CLASS FOR ITSELF*, page 419.

and smile, this (normally personal) interaction becomes a compulsory one. Their emotional labour is thus alienated from them. The interpersonal interaction does not arise naturally out of their true feelings of friendliness towards the customer (although a genuine response from the customer might generate a genuine response). Does it have a value, this alienated labour? Oh yes. Ask any café owner who the best waiters are and they are invariably the same people who are friendly to the customers. Ask any customer what they think of a surly waiter, and you will again see the value of this emotional labour. Some Nimbin people just won't do it unless it's genuine. This reflects a cultural priority for "emotional truthfulness." Some behave as if the tourists are an imposition on their time, and service can be very poor.

Another way that locals minimise the impact of tourists is by treating tourists like they are not there or that they are deaf, mute and insensitive. This is in marked contrast to the welcome accorded to locals. There is a kind of like it or lump it attitude, a passive resistance to outside domination. Some people within the Nimbin community have always had a cavalier attitude to tourists, as the following quote suggests.

You could get banned [from the Rainbow Café] if you were really offensive, but at the same time the loonies were tolerated. They were entertainment, and the tourists were meant to handle the fact that some schitzo might be standing on their table half-naked, or playing guitar really badly and singing at the top of his voice, or whatever.

Interview with Micky, October 1998.

Another occasional reaction is harassment of visitors on the street by locals. For example a local person outside the Nimbin museum responded to the shy and somewhat intimidated body language of an elderly woman visitor by walking down the street beside her, repeatedly saying in a loud and gruff (aggressive) voice, "You alright grandma?" until she eventually replied, "Yes thank you." It forced an interaction between the tourist and local person. It also shows a certain impatience with tourists coming to stare but not treating you as a person. This includes resentment at being treated like an exhibit of some kind, and playing to the druggie stereotype. This too, is part of the "communal dance." By enforcing an exchange, the locals establish themselves as human beings rather than bit-part actors in the "Nimbin Hippie Theme

Park.” Nimbin has always been a confrontational town, and people are likely to have their ideas challenged there.

9.3.1 Eco-tourism

Eco-tourism is one of a number of ways in which the local population have mounted an organised resistance to the take-over of their tourism industry by organisations that are not sensitive to them as a culture or to the environment. As the *Nimbin & Environs* booklet notes,

Ecotourism is sustainable nature-based tourism that involves education and interpretation of the natural environment and its cultural components.

The Northern NSW Ecotourism Association (NNETA) aims to promote and develop outdoor and nature based Ecotourism in our region, promote understanding, appreciation and consideration of the natural and cultural environments visited, and facilitate interaction between tourists, host communities, the tourism industry, government and conservation groups.

Nimbin & Environs, No. 3, 23.

An increasing tourist industry puts pressure on the environment. Despite claims to be non-exploitative, the tourist trade does more than “take photos and leave footprints.”²⁵⁸

A letter to *Earth Garden* showed the tensions that arise when alternatives host tourists from the city. At issue in this case is the high-power consumption of the guests. The alternative power sources generated sufficient power to run the household when it was being lived by in its owners, but guests are not motivated to conserve the power.

²⁵⁸ Even footprints can be desecration: the footprints left on Mount Warning by non-Aboriginal visitors are likely to be offensive to the Bundjalung people. The request by Aboriginal people that tourists not climb Uluru (Ayres Rock) has not been respected.

As we don't live at the property anymore we rent it out to tourists. The system handles everything fine in the summer months but in winter - well, the guests are using up to 100 amperes at 24 volts.

Earth Garden Website.²⁵⁹

Tuntable Falls is now off-limits to groups on account of the environmental problems resulting from large parties of visitors, all wearing suntan lotion and insect repellent arriving at the waterfall and going for a swim. The community believed that this was harmful to the ecosystem of the waterways and their ownership of the property allowed them to enforce this. Commitment to the environment, strengthened by their independence of tourism money (they did not benefit from these visitors and the Tuntable community will not suffer financially from the access restrictions) means they are not dissuaded from acting in defence of their environment. In any case they have an ideology that puts the environment above money.

9.4 Artisans

Artisan work is popularly seen to be one of the things that alternatives do to make a living, however early studies showed that very little of the income of the alternative lifestyle participants was derived from arts and crafts.

[New settlers] ... may intend to survive through the production of cottage crafts or low technology industries such as furniture making, spinning and weaving or pottery.

Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 2.

The making and selling of arts and crafts is, in popular mythology, often associated with alternative lifestyles. In reality only 2% of all participants rely on this source of income. Those who do depend on the sale of art and craft goods are more likely to be in small towns than in either city or rural areas.

Metcalf & Vancley, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 55.

²⁵⁹ <http://www.earthgarden.com.au/>

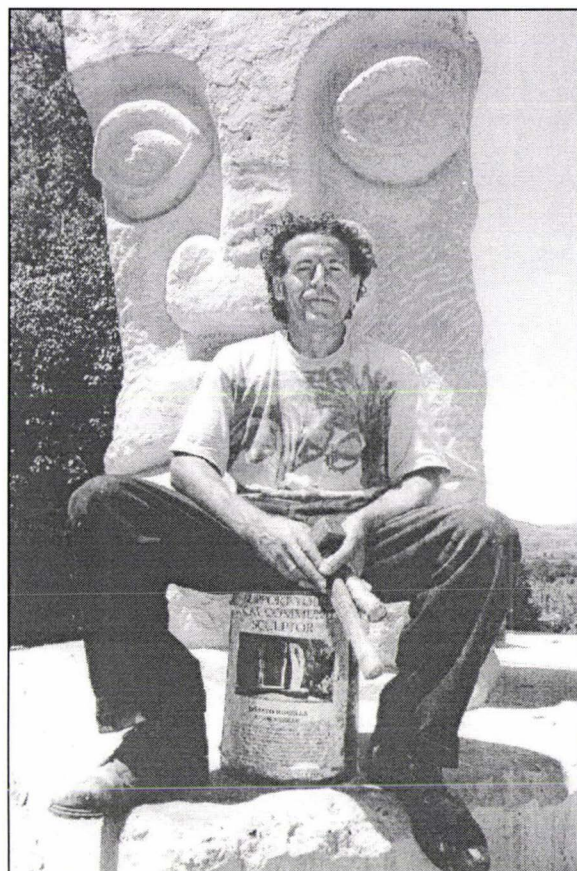
However, with tourist numbers increasing the economic importance of these cottage industries is rapidly growing. The main purchasers of these arts and crafts producers are the wealthier tourists whose existence makes the alternative lifestyle of these migrant producers more viable. There is an attraction in owning something that has been handcrafted, and the high labour content of many items is reflected in the price.

The Australia Council for the Arts has estimated that there are more professional artists per capita in this region than anywhere else in Australia. ... For a small rural village Nimbin is astonishingly artful with a thriving fashion design industry, a resident dance company, a recording studio, poets, choirs and feral arts exhibitions.

Dunstan, *Images from the Edge*, Position Paper, 1994, 6-7.

Whether the alternative lifestyle artisans could afford to be artisans in the city is an interesting point. Their costs of living (and producing) would be much higher, and the opportunity for co-operation with other artisans generally less. Also for

some, the higher cost of living in the city might have prevented them from acquiring the necessary infrastructure to start up, and lessened the viability of the project on account of the on-going costs of living and working in an urban area. To cover expenses, the products they make either have to cost more, or the artisan has to make many more of them. In either case, in the city there is usually no comfort zone in which the person can withstand a period with little or no income.



The visual and performing arts are an integral part of life in Nimbin. The stone sculptures in Nimbin Park were created by stonemason Donato Rosella as a gift to the local community. Like many other Nimbin artists, Donato is multi-talented and his skills were a feature of the Easter 1977 Visions of Nimbin Cultural Exposition. [Donato sits on a collection tin that reads, "Support your local community sculptor."]

Photo: Phantom Possum. [Photo and caption sourced from the 1998 Visions of Nimbin fund-raising calendar.]

There are some tireless artisans who work for free or inexpensively (for example, living on donations, or on commission from local authorities) on behalf of the Nimbin community. Benny Zable's shop-front murals and banners are another example of this activity.

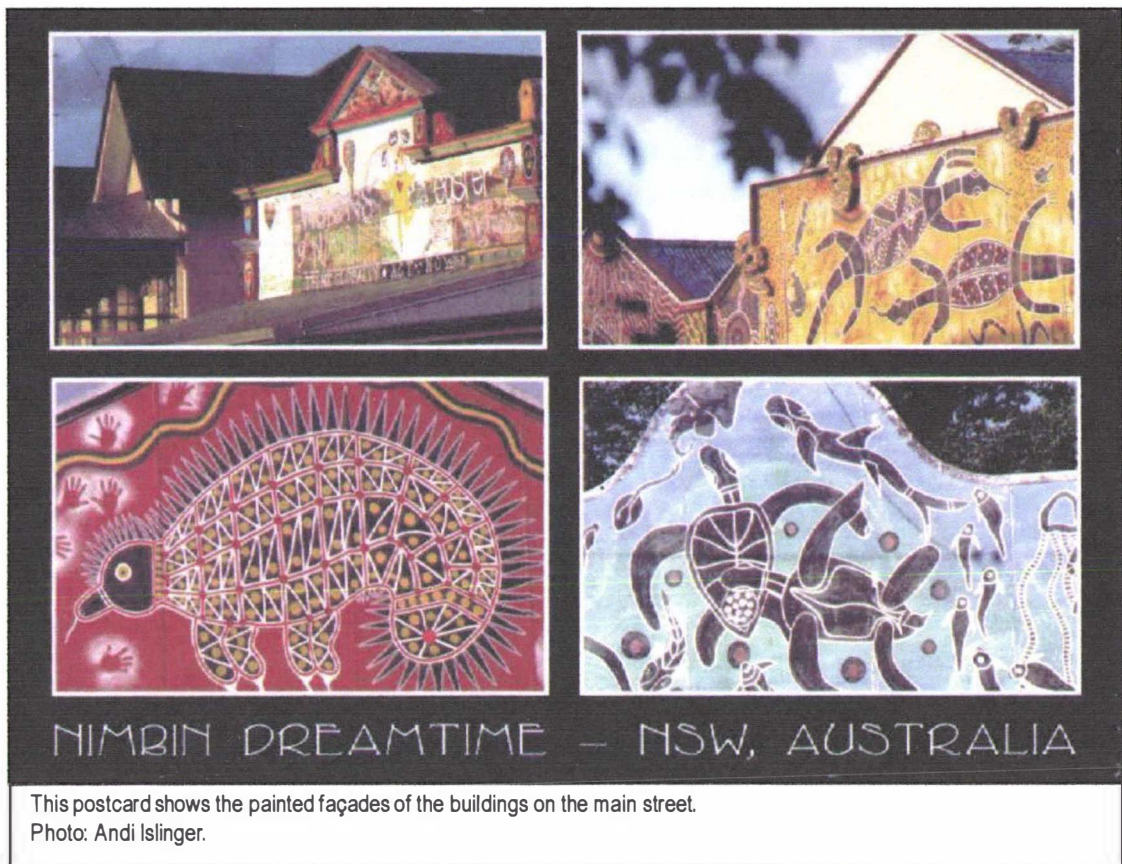
Interestingly, much of this activity is still veiled in alternative ideology, although economic facts are acknowledged. These tendencies can be seen in the following quotes from two of the three people who worked at Wildskins, a clothing outlet.

We do what we do because we love it. We have a passion for it. We have to do it. Money is very secondary. We're very lucky here in Nimbin, you don't have huge mortgages, huge overheads and all that sort of thing, so we are a lot freer in terms of financial stress and struggle. ...

I see now why Clare was really needed, Clare being a Libra, being really a balancer, bringing it together. She's a bit wise with figures and counting things up really, but apart from that she's our best salesperson in the shop because she's quite enthusiastic about what we are selling there.

Sects, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

High-value, labour-intensive specialist boutique products and crafts are produced mainly for the tourist market. These include paintings, apparel and fabric arts, graphic design, blown-glass and stained-glass work, clothing, candles, jewellery and crystals, carved and turned wood objects, photographs, pottery, leather crafts, woven rugs, dyed fabrics, sculpture, clothing, and food products are available. Products made with essential oils, for example, cosmetics, candles, massage oils, soaps and foods scented and flavoured with pure oils like lavender, eucalyptus, sandalwood abound. Locally produced videos, compact discs and books are also sold, and a great deal of drug paraphernalia and information is available.



Other alternative cultural artefacts are postcards of Nimbin. They show how important the alternative lifestyle inhabitants of this little town are as the “voice” of the alternative lifestyle in Australia, as well as the increasing dependence of the Rainbow Region on the tourist dollar. There are a huge variety of postcards of Nimbin, showing both the beautiful scenery and community highlights, such as the Mardi-Grass Hemp Festival, market days and street scenes. Postcards are one of the cultural products produced particularly for the tourism market. They retail for only a couple of dollars apiece so they are an affordable item that nearly every tourist purchases. While the unit price is low, the volume of postcards sold means that they bring in a surprising amount of money.

Over time, several of the people who produce postcards depicting Nimbin have gone from hand mounting their photographs on card, to having them commercially printed. For one of the more successful postcard producers, Andi Islinger, the sale of postcards now represents a “normal average income,” and true to the Nimbin spirit, Andi donates

20% of the income earned from postcard sales to permaculture projects in the area. When the business was started in 1991, it earned less than \$10,000 a year.²⁶⁰

The Nimbin Candle factory has been manufacturing beautiful candles for over two decades, and the business currently employs four workers. In making their dipped candles they use a modification of a 16th Century process, where cotton wicks are hung from cup-hooks and dipped into the hot wax, lifted out and allowed to cool, and then dipped again to build layer on layer of wax. The process continues until the candles are of the desired thickness. They are made from beautifully coloured non-toxic wax, and are scented.

For the first 12 years we worked from a rough shack in the bush using gas heating and a small hydroelectric rig. The next 10 years we have been in an old butter factory on the edge of town with 240V main power and town water pressure for the hydraulic dipper.

Nimbin Candles Website.²⁶¹

Over time, the process has undergone mechanisation as the business has developed from a cottage industry to its present state. The above quote confirms the claim that when a cottage industry gets to a certain level of complexity it becomes necessary to have access to better quality infrastructure: space in the strata-title Bush Factory, mains power, town water supply and machinery.²⁶² Nimbin Candles, like many Nimbin businesses, advertises on the internet. It needs to be said that most rural businesses of this size were not on the internet in 1999. This reflects the availability of cheap computing expertise in Nimbin because most business of their size would not be able to

²⁶⁰ Andi Islinger, Personal Communication, 5 February 1999.

²⁶¹ <http://teleport.nwt.net.au/candles/history.htm>

²⁶² The Bush Factory building was formerly the Nimbin Butter Factory. More space for these kinds of businesses has been built on Alternative Way, and there have been proposals for more commercial space.

afford the cost of designing and maintaining a web presence at normal “city” rates for the internet site development.²⁶³

The old Butter Factory also houses Wicked Weave, a business that specialises in designing and manufacturing clothing from knitted hemp fabric. Their creations are lovely, often colourful with long flowing lines. They are structured so zips, buttons and other hard fasteners are not needed and don’t require ironing. This business draws in the unique aspects of the Nimbin lifestyle – both in their use of natural fibres (and of hemp fibre in particular) and in the design of the clothing reflecting important aspects of the alternative lifestyle culture.²⁶⁴

9.4.1 Markets & fairs

The monthly Channon and Nimbin markets are part of the Nimbin experience. Markets are a place where the alternative lifestyle participants regularly meet with the more mainstream residents and in this way they act as integrative forces. The viability of these outlets is sustained by the tourist dollar. This is where much of the craftwork is displayed and sold. These markets are tourist attractions and are promoted as such.²⁶⁵

It hasn’t always been like this, and market days were an early source of conflict between the straight and alternative communities.

Another point of dissension was the Sunday market day organised by the new settlers, which was regarded by some of the local residents, particularly the retailers, as “unfairly competitive” ...

²⁶³ See RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT WORK: Computer-based work, page 321

²⁶⁴ See also HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTION: Appearance, page 388.

²⁶⁵ Local markets are identified as added attractions for persons coming to the Mardi Grass. Strong, Leah, Kate Ledger & Brad Aird, Unpublished Event Management Unit, 1998, Section 2.1.

The beginnings of a barter economy and the general lower material standard of living of the new settlers, was resented and feared by the locals, including businessmen.

Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 19.



Nimbin Country Market.
Photo by Andy and Sue.

Aquarius Fair is a new fair day and has emerged from the

Visions of Nimbin Expo. It is set

to take its place as another vehicle for providing a positive public face on the alternative lifestyle. Aquarius Fair is held at the Community Centre grounds, which has space for 150 stalls, entertainment, speakers corner, art exhibitions, children's activities, and the focus is on education, society, and the environment. It is thoughtfully timed not to coincide with the Nimbin Market day.

The Aquarius Fair is essentially an extension of creative activity, overflowing from the newly arrived Community Centre. This expression will also integrate the concept of the Visions of Nimbin project, which is a tremendous growing success story, bringing the community forward into a positive creative future, displaying innovation and organisational skills.

Supported by the Aquarius Foundation, this new market will maintain the essence of the early creative Aquarius era and strengthen this position for Nimbin as a whole.

"Aquarius Fair" notice, *Nimbin News*, December 1998–January 1999, 34.

9.4.2 Festivals

Festivals have become an important part of the Nimbin calendar, and can be seen both as ideological practices and as important economic events. The 20th and 25th anniversaries of the original Aquarius Festival were celebrated. The annual Mardi Grass Hemp Festival is one of the highlights of the Nimbin year. In 1997 and 1998 "Visions of

Nimbin,” a trade and cultural exposition was held and this, too, looks likely to become an annual event.

These festivals have the advantage of attracting people who are more like-minded than the curious (but mainly straight) back-packers and the day-tourists arriving from Queensland. They help Nimbin maintain its image as a place for alternative culture, and strengthen community bonds through ritual. It is perhaps a good adaptation for the alternative culture: a chance to collectively put their best foot forward, and then return to life as usual. Festivals also remind residents of their bond with other locals, recognition of the lifestyle they share.

The preparation for, and production of, a festival causes people to cross social boundaries and interact in different ways. The tourism information centre does business with the local dance troupe, a visual artist building a bonfire does business with the boy scout troop and the fire brigade and so on. In this way networks of association within the community are extended and deepened.

Graeme Dunstan, *A Position Paper on Community Celebrations*, 1994, 2.

Festivals also serve as a source of recruitment because, as concisely put by Graeme Dunstan, “visitation precedes migration.”²⁶⁶ The alternative lifestyle in Nimbin relies on the constant recruitment of like-minded adults, and festivals are a way of exposing the positive aspects of the town to potential migrants. Survey results from the 1997 Mardi Grass suggests that most of the people who attended the event were in the usual recruitment age-range: 41.7% aged 15-24, and 36.4% were aged 25-44.²⁶⁷ Festivals also act to pre-socialise aspirant migrants, and the more realistic and accurate their expectations are on arrival the easier it is for them to integrate into the community.

²⁶⁶ Graeme Dunstan, *A Position Paper on Community Celebrations*, 1994, 1.

²⁶⁷ Survey conducted by Derrett, Prosser & Dimmock, *Lismore City Council Festival and Event Strategy*, School of Tourism & Hospitality Management, Southern Cross University, Lismore, 1998. Cited by Strong, Leah, Kate Ledger & Brad Aird, Unpublished Event Management Unit, 1998, Section 4.1.

The first Mardi Grass festival came about as a means of transforming a previously negative and aggressive response to the annual drugs bust into something positive. In 1993 the police anti-cannabis activities had been particularly invasive and unpleasant and, following the arrest of a local person, frustrated locals pelted the police station with food and toilet paper.²⁶⁸ This, of course, resulted in more bad publicity for Nimbin. Rather than allowing another riot to result from the inevitable drug-busts the next year, and “in the spirit of reconciliation” so central to the Nimbin alternative culture, a rally was planned.

[R]ather than going, “We had a riot last year, let’s see if we can this year as well,” it was like, “We had a riot last year, let’s try and keep it nice and friendly,” so they went to the cops and said, “We’re going to do it officially, we’re going to make it big,” and they sort of negotiated with the cops and although the cops never really said officially, “We won’t bust people over the weekend,” ... they do keep a pretty low profile. They realise it’s good for the town, a money-maker and also if they tried to bust someone, especially for smoking, they would have major riots on their hands.

Interview with Micky, October 1997.

Again, the crisis of policing is evident. The rally was meant to show that making criminals of otherwise law-abiding persons was counter-productive and a bad use of police resources. Around 1,000 people chanted, “We are not criminals” as they marched down the main street. The publicity the rally attracted showed the strength of the opposition to the drug laws and provided a positive vehicle for the drug-law reform movement, coupled with a chance to address some of the misinformation that mainstream media present on the issues.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ The police conducting major anti-drugs operations during harvest season are brought into the area from outside. The relationship that the community has with the local police is usually cordial.

²⁶⁹ This will be examined again in *CLASS FOR ITSELF*, page 419.



Hemp Rally.
Photo: Andi Islinger.

In this sense Mardi Grass represents a holiday from prohibition, achieved through the force of “mob rule.” By turning up in force this group of persons legalise, for the duration of the event, smoking and trading in cannabis in the Nimbin area. This is an instance of the direct use of crowd force by a class. Nothing can be done about it unless the police are prepared to make a real issue of it which the police don’t see as worth their while.

From a class standpoint, the rally should be also viewed as political activism to

protect one of the primary sources of income of this class group. The periods of repression that Nimbin has undergone, particularly the anti-drugs raids but also the environmental and Multiple Occupancy struggles, play a big role in the festival. The unrelentingly positive character of festivals in Nimbin can be seen as a direct response to that repression and a cultural inversion of the popular conceptions of drug use, community and environmental activism. Mardi Grass is arguably the equivalent of an agricultural or trade fair for cannabis, where produce is viewed, contacts are made, competitions are run, associated products are demonstrated and sold.

But the celebration is much more subversive than that [drug law reform protest]. Celebration creates culture and thus the Nimbin Mardi Grass more than expresses contemporary cannabis culture in Australia, it is central to creating and sustaining it. Pushing drug law reform by celebrating the hemp harvest has turned the curse of drug abuse into the blessing of cultural creativity, community vitality and economic prosperity for Nimbin.

Dunstan, *The Background Story of the Nimbin Mardi Grass* (Draft 10 March 1999.)

There is continued debate over how the festivals should be promoted, who benefits and how the events are controlled. In recent times, one of the leading lights in the Hemp Embassy, Bob Hopkins, has stepped away from his role as spokesperson for drug law reform, believing the annual Mardi Grass rallies were becoming “drug promotion” rather than drug law reform events.

[M]y actions came to be perceived as being a drug promotion operation and the movement that developed around my initiatives similarly failed to make the distinction.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the annual Mardi Grass which I conceived in 1992 as an empowerment ritual for otherwise law-abiding pot users who were the ones most subjugated by the drug laws. [Bob Hopkins.]

“Nimbin at Crossroads,” *Northern Star*, 30 December 1997, 9.

Because the festival is linked with an illegal substance, the Lismore City Council will not allocate funds to provide services and facilities like parking attendants, crowd control, ablutions and media promotion.²⁷⁰ The conservative Agriculture and Industry Society still refuse permission for their show-grounds to be used during Mardi Grass for the same reasons.²⁷¹ However, in 1997 the Lismore City Council repaired the access road to the Nimbin Rocks festival site, which they could do as part of their road maintenance programme.

²⁷⁰ Personal communication with Brendan Toohey, Town Planner, Lismore City Council, reported in Strong, Leah, Kate Ledger & Brad Aird, Unpublished Event Management Unit, 1998, Section 3.3.

²⁷¹ “Mardi Grass 97 ... A Car’s Eye Overview,” *Nimbin News*, June–July 1997, 22.

The illegality of the Mardi Grass festival makes it a piece of public property that can't be taken from the cannabis growers and users in the Nimbin area. Mardi Grass is a famous "brand," a valuable event. The private ownership of most festival events – an ordinary fair, concert, market or circus, can be transferred as private property. Mardi Grass, on the other hand, because it is based on an illegal industry, cannot be transferred simply because there is no law that can sanction its sale. That is why when Bob Hopkins left the festival there was no question of the festival going with him, or of Mardi Grass not going ahead without him.

So prohibition, ironically, is another way in which the public property of the cannabis growers and users in this community cannot be alienated from their festival. It is prohibition that protects their cultural property, *because* there is no legal basis on which their property could be sold. It could only be taken off them by the use of (massive) force. It would require a major police operation, which would be unlikely to succeed. The very first Mardi Grass parade was refused permission and went ahead regardless.

The first year of the festival (1993) the Lismore City Council denied the Mardi Grass organisers permission to use the local park. The rally went ahead anyway, and around 1000 people joined in the march as it went up the main street. In subsequent years the organisers didn't ask permission to use a public place, and now, with much wider public support for the event, the Councils official line is that permission is not required. The "Let it Grow" May Day Rally, and street parade was created as an opportunity for people to come together in a combined strength, peacefully, responsibly to indicate their opinions about the drug laws and their impact on society.

"A Short History of the Mardi Grass," *Nimbin News*, April-May 1997, 4.

Mardi Grass is quite hard on the town's infrastructure and sometimes strains the good will of the locals. By 1996 the festival was so popular that the press of people inside local stores meant that the shopkeepers had to restrict access. Storekeepers reported a lot

of theft, which meant that many of them did not make a profit from Mardi Grass.²⁷²

Others, who live in and near the village, had people camping on their land without permission, property damage, parking, theft and litter problems, and some complained about festival-goers “shitting on the lawn.” Not surprisingly, some of the local people find it hard to look forward to the festival. This bad behaviour was blamed on the “yobbo element,” from Southern Queensland, who came to the festival with a “different agenda.” Since then the festival organisers have been devising strategies to discourage the people who are there only for the drugs.

After 1996 it was considered that the festival had “outgrown” the town. In order to lessen the effect of the festival, the 1997 Mardi Grass was held at the Nimbin Rocks, rather than in the centre of Nimbin. The Nimbin Rocks Initiative had two goals. First, to host the festival out of the main street of Nimbin, and



second, in a spirit of reconciliation with the Aboriginal people, to link it symbolically with the sacred Nimbin Rocks and to provide services to that land and its people. To that end, underground power and water was laid on, toilet and shower blocks were erected, a performance stage was built, lighting organised, gravel tracks were laid and hessian fences curtained the area. Much of the useful infrastructure was to remain on site for use by the owners of the land and for future festivals.

²⁷² “Mardi Grass 97 ... A Car’s Eye Overview,” *Nimbin News*, June-July 1997, 22. Anecdotal evidence suggests that much of this theft was caused by people getting fed-up with the long wait to be served and the crush inside the stores and simply walking out with the goods.

While 4,000 people were estimated to have attended Mardi Grass that year (1997) the festival lost money for the first time. This was due in part to the bigger than normal investment in infrastructure in order to stage the event at Nimbin Rocks and partly due to bad weather.

A report from the Mardi Grass Organising Body after the 1997 festival points to the independence of this festival from the interests of outside capital. The organisers still depend on local money and huge amounts of free labour to hold the festival. The high use of volunteer labour demonstrates community support and at the same time engenders a sense of ownership of the Mardi Grass. This is evident in the comparatively low debt of around \$13,800 – despite the increased expense from infrastructure development, the limited success of the 1997 Mardi Grass, and the lack of support from council and local businesses.²⁷³

Our budget was basically ‘zilch’ so we had to be very creative when making our vision a reality. Five thousand dollars was borrowed from a sympathetic local supporter. This money was of course invaluable for infrastructure costs that could not be booked up.

Accounts were opened at relevant shops and businesses, both in Lisimore and Nimbin, and costs of materials were kept as low as possible.

“Nimbin MardiGrass ’97 Rocks Site Initiative,” *Nimbin News*. June–July 1997, 3 & 12.

The lack of financial support from the local petit-bourgeoisie was an issue for the organisers of the 1997 Mardi Grass. In an article for *Nimbin News* during the organising period prior to the festival, the organising body wrote, “Needless to say we need you to support the work we’re doing to help us keep it going, and any personal or financial assistance is appreciated. (Also, by the way, relatively rare.)” They went on to comment that due to prohibition, “we have no sponsors.”²⁷⁴

²⁷³ In comparison the similarly styled 1999 Sweetwaters Festival in New Zealand went into receivership owing \$3 million. Radio New Zealand Midday News item, 12 December 1999.

²⁷⁴ “The Bear Rolls On,” *Nimbin News*, April–May, 1997, 5

Donations from the community were seen as being quite low considering the work that had been put in for the profit to be reaped (most particularly in the case of the hotel.) The generous donors are gratefully acknowledged and appreciated in their rarity.

“Nimbin MardiGrass '97 Rocks Site Initiative,” *Nimbin News*, June-July 1997, 12.

Perhaps the “rarity” of financial support from local businesses can be partly explained when you consider the results of the survey of spending: it is probable that the Nimbin petit-bourgeoisie don’t perceive much benefit from the Mardi Grass. These figures could also explain why Mardi Grass has remained relatively free of outside capital, as they point to low spending in the formal economy by the participants. Most people who attended were locals, or visitors who camped or visited friends, between them accounting for the 75.8% who reported spending nothing on accommodation. Less than \$10 was spent on food by over half (53.8%) of the people attending Mardi Grass, of whom 22.7% spent nothing at all.²⁷⁵ Here we find good reasons for café owners and providers of accommodation not to be overly generous in their support of Mardi Grass. A very high 81.8% spent nothing on tickets to the organised events. Yet 71.2% did claim to spend money in Nimbin. While the researchers did not find out what the money was spent on, by a process of elimination and informed-guesswork, I expect that the purchase of informal market craft items and cannabis would account for the rest of the money spent during Mardi Grass.

Amazingly, research shows that the festival is still largely promoted by word-of-mouth. Nearly two-thirds (64.4%) heard of Mardi Grass through the grapevine. Radio (9.8%) and television (3%) coverage accounted for the other main sources of information. This points to the continued effectiveness of the informal information network that supports the entire cannabis industry.

²⁷⁵ Survey conducted by Derrett, Prosser & Dimmock, *Lismore City Council Festival and Event Strategy*, School of Tourism & Hospitality Management, Southern Cross University, Lismore, 1998. Cited in Strong, Leah, Kate Ledger & Brad Aird, Unpublished Event Management Unit, 1998, Section 4.1.

Visions of Nimbin

The Visions of Nimbin Expo, a cultural and trade fair, was first held over the Easter weekend of 1997, to promote the positive side of Nimbin, and to help raise money to purchase the Community Centre site. Visions of Nimbin aimed at allowing the visitor insights into the innovation and lifestyle practices of alternative settlers, rather than just the street-scene images that dominate many tourist impressions. Yet the Visions of Nimbin celebration gets only local media coverage, while Mardi Grass gets national television coverage, and even some international coverage.



Visions of Nimbin is a cultural exposition and trade fair centred around the achievements, dreams and visions of the people of the Nimbin region, a celebration of the life and aspirations that have flowered here and created Nimbin's international reputation.

Visions of Nimbin advertising flyer, 1997.

Significantly, the number of visitors to the Visions of Nimbin Expo dropped from 7,000 in 1997 to an unexpectedly low 2,000 in 1998. In my view the following quote proves that despite the intentions of the organisers of the Visions of Nimbin Expo, the success of their venture is also dependent upon the perceived availability of cannabis.

[W]e are certain about ... the effect of the Police blitz. From Wednesday through Saturday Nimbin was bailed up by Police sent in from outside for 'Operation Hubbard.' Word spread rapidly around the district and all the way up the Gold Coast to at least as far as Brisbane, and I've had many reports that people who wanted to come decided they wouldn't run the risk. [Scott 'Slippery' Sledge.]

"Visions of Nimbin '98," *Nimbin News*. October-November 1998, 3.

The (negative) expectation by alternative lifestyle people of police harassment would have put many people off. Most of the visitors to Visions of Nimbin would be people

who fit the police “likely drug user” profile. It also shows that outside interests (in this case the Police) can impact on the success and failure of the alternative lifestyle community and their efforts to redefine how Nimbin is perceived.

Chapter 10. Research & Development Work

10.0 Introduction

Over the last ten years there has been a growth in non-traditional industries in Nimbin. Industries such as computing and the design and manufacture of alternative energy technologies add a new dimension to economic development in the region.

The settlement of non-traditional industry in peripheral areas can be looked at from the viewpoint of Phase III of the classical core-periphery theory.²⁷⁶ As the theory has it, core industries will respond to increased demands from their labour force for better wages and conditions, and to stronger anti-pollution laws, and other rising costs by moving their business to the peripheral areas. It is easier to (force a peripheral government to) deal with a less dominant workforce than to deal with the local highly skilled, well-organised (unionised) workforce. The advantages for the owners are many. Wages are lower, both on account of the lower cost of the reproduction of that labour and because unions tend to be less powerful. In third-world countries anti-pollution and workplace health and safety regulations are softer and less well enforced, so foreign companies can be less careful of the health and safety of their workers or of the pollution outputs of their industry.²⁷⁷

Land, and therefore rent, is cheaper. In addition, they often get incentives to “bring employment and industry to the area” in the form of set-up grants, lower taxes, and exemptions from the normal development regulations. By moving the enterprise to a peripheral country, the industry doesn’t have to contribute to the general cost of reproducing its labour force. With the expanding third-world markets for their goods, too, manufacturing consumer goods within the country where they are sold means they are closer to their end-users, which saves on transport costs.

²⁷⁶ See also *SITUATING NIMBIN: The influence of core-periphery development patterns*, page 65.

²⁷⁷ The Union Carbide accident in Bophal, India is testament to this.

While it is true that some industry has been re-settled in the peripheral areas of Australia with state and federal government incentives, generally speaking this hasn't happened, and when it has, it has tended to be specialist (niche) industry. It is cheaper for trans-national capitalist industries to go off-shore and utilise the more docile (exploitable) work-forces in the poorer Pacific Rim countries, especially Asia, than to remain in Australia or to set up there (even in the areas of Australia where there is an employment crisis). The decisions are made by the parent companies, in boardrooms in the United States and in Europe.

The subordinated position of the Australian *rural* economy is shown by its increased dependence upon outside intervention to survive. Things have moved a long way from the old days when the financial state of Australia rode "on the sheep's back." These days active intervention is needed to prevent the collapse of the rural economy.

Development theories that are produced in the core tend to see the change in the periphery from the viewpoint of the movement of their own core capital exported to the regions. This points to the origin of the classical core-periphery theory as a "core" theory to explain why development in third world countries wasn't working. The point that I am making is that if the core-periphery phenomenon is seen simply as the repatriation of large-scale industries, important features of the process will be missed, not just in Nimbin but wherever the theory is applied. It is a weakness in the standard model, and is related to the *theory's* localisation within the core. In other words, it is a theory belonging to, and produced in, the "core areas" of imperialist capital. Being a theory that looks from the core to the periphery, whether generously or apologetically, it has the problem of being situated within the imperialist intellectual milieu.

The development of the Nimbin economy differs from the standard core-periphery development model. This is partly due to the fact that Nimbin is a rural periphery *within* an industrialised core country, rather than being part of a peripheral third-world (satellite) country, and partly due to unique features of Nimbin's political economy. However, if you broaden the framework to include the establishment of urban industries in the countryside (such as the computing and energy design sector) rather than narrowly

interpreting it as the repatriation of large-scale industries, then the model holds true for the Nimbin economy.

The creation of non-capitalist industry can provide a way for poor people in the periphery to make a living. This is an important aspect of core-periphery relationships that tends to be neglected in standard core-periphery analyses. The standard model is focused so much on the capitalist sector as the future of the third world that it fails to adequately account for the fact that there is a large amount of economic activity – economic change and development – that takes place inside the third world that is neither traditional nor part of modern international capitalist structures.

From the point of view of the people at the colonised periphery, however, there is more going on. Not all of them are absorbed into capitalist industry brought in from outside and most of them still spend most of their time making a living in either traditional ways or in new ways, without themselves working in large-scale industry repatriated from the metropolis.

Looking at Nimbin and the economic structures that have built up as being determined by the movement of capital can over-rate the influence of capital. The version of core-periphery theory that I seek to develop in this thesis differs from the original “standard” version of the theory in that it is a local anthropology of the core-periphery process. Instead of looking at processes from the point of view of the centre, in which core industry either is or is not exported to the periphery, I look at it from the point of view of the response of the people who live in the colonialised periphery to the core-periphery processes that have impacted upon them.

Goddard (1983) points out the extent to which the people involved in this “rural renaissance” have revitalised local rural economies, but show that this has **not been achieved through increased primary production so much as by other forms of economic activity**. This will, nevertheless, have beneficial spin off effects on traditional rural dwellers.

Mercalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 48. [Emphasis mine.]

The influx of highly educated and trained people, with their professional skills, into depressed rural areas, has already been referred to as a factor in rural cultural renaissance.

Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 54.

The huge variety of skills that proved to be available in Nimbin further demonstrates the difference between the migrants from the city and the straight rural population. In 1992 a skills survey was undertaken in the Nimbin area, and identified 400 discrete skills in the wider population of 3000 residents.²⁷⁸ This skills base is more reminiscent of a large urban population than a rural location, and reflects the effects of the migration of skilled workers from the cities.

A social experiment

As they sought to resolve the problems confronting them, the alternatives invented some of the new technologies, and popularised and modernised others. The social environment of the alternative lifestyle has permitted particular innovations and developments. For a population with an assured subsistence income, spare (discretionary) time and education, Nimbin can be a very productive place to live.

The alternative lifestyle participants believe they are engaging in a social experiment. During *Couchman Over Australia*, a programme shown on Australian television, Bill Metcalf stated that the alternative movement is seeking and finding answers to social and environmental problems.²⁷⁹ Another person in the same programme said, "It's a think-tank of what was called alternative ideas, but they're now becoming necessary to the mainstream." I agree that the time has come for many of the "alternative" technologies to start having a mainstream niche market in developed countries. Low-cost solutions such as composting toilets are now being used in National Parks and at rest areas on major highways. The composting toilets are both cost efficient and less

²⁷⁸ "Self Sufficient Local Economy," *Nimbin News*, April-May 1999, 24.

²⁷⁹ *Couchman Over Australia*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1991.

environmentally disruptive than old-fashioned plumbed toilets. This kind of technology arose from meeting domestic needs as the following quote demonstrates.

[I] have also helped to pioneer affordable, rational sewerage disposal. When our small cottage was complete, Ellen and I decided to build a composting toilet, rather than the septic system required by council. Negotiations with the council revealed that state health authorities did not approve the use of owner-built composting dunnies. Nevertheless, the council bravely gave us the go-ahead and asked me to put together a little how-to booklet on building and maintaining the units, because they knew the demand was there ... Over the years I have mailed out over 700 copies of the plans, and intermittent visits by parties of bureaucrats, health officials, and other interested persons have made our loo probably the most peered-in (if not peed-in) in the nation. [Leigh Davison]

Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality*, 1995, 55.

In this sense too, the alternative lifestyle is offering a more general “blue-print” for third world countries. Inexpensive solutions to the need for quality housing without deforestation are being created, and ancient ideas like mud-brick housing are being improved. New less-invasive practices and technologies, like mobile mills and selective logging help protect the environmental resources of third world countries that export wood. The benefits for third world development are obvious. Alternative technologies help protect waterways through recycling grey-water and different forms of sewerage disposal. The alternatives pioneered clean, efficient and sustainable energy supply from nature. Ecological issues are addressed by the developing sustainable permaculture practices.

Nimbin’s uniqueness has lent itself to the setting up of the Rainbow Power Company here a lot more successfully than it could have done anywhere else in the country. In this area we have lots of really committed people, people with great environmental awareness, and people who are really keen on trying out new experiments. I know of people around here that were nuclear physicists etc, you know. They just didn’t want to be part of that anymore, so they decided to come to Nimbin.

Aquarius Revisited: Under The Rainbow – Still Dreaming, That’s History Programme, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1993.

The economics of the new technologies are very revealing. Many of these ventures are only possible because of the alternative ideological and economic framework, which encourages mutual co-operation and permits lower incomes. For example, in an environment where labour is cheap (or free) alternative building methods are viable when otherwise they would be economically unsustainable. Hand-made mud-brick (adobe) construction is an example. In a time-rich, low-cash environment such activity is possible. The commercial costs of such building would be prohibitive on account of the labour costs until the process is mechanised.

If they had not done the building work themselves, Trish admits that the building would have been extremely expensive. The earth brick method is very labour intensive. I have signed up for [one of the] earth building workshops that the couple run. Of course, they are 'hands-on' workshops: Jo and Trish are not the type to waste voluntary labour!

Diana Lancaster, "Breakfast With The Birds," *Growing Today*, April 1994, 43.

The low overheads and the rural lifestyle combine to mean some of these migrants can and will work as self-employed researchers and developers for much lower wages than a scientist in a large city-based research and development laboratory. Instead of commanding an income in excess of \$A80-\$100,000 a year to work nine-to-five for an exploitative trans-national organisation, developers in Nimbin will work for less than half that, often considerably less. For example, Kali McLaughlin, a founder member, an alternative electronics engineer and shareholder of the Rainbow Power Company, worked for another company for a year for \$12,000.²⁸⁰ Alternative people tend to be more concerned that their technology is sustainable and affordable, rather than making a huge profit from it, and this is consistent with the alternative ideology.

The point must be made that the wages are not low in the abstract. The wages they receive are low *relative* to the employees in comparable high-tech energy/research companies. Alternative lifestyle participants from professional backgrounds trade off income for lifestyle.

²⁸⁰ "Kali on Alternative Energy," *Nimbin News*, August–September 1998, 7.

10.1 Rainbow Power Company – Case Study

The Rainbow Power Company offers a range of power supply services, including hydro, solar and wind power solutions, and they install and service them according to the needs of the user. Rainbow Power also manufactures some of their retail alternative power units from standard components. Their products meet the quality assurance standards based on the internationally recognised ISO9902. They also offer professional advice and run training workshops on maintenance and installation to spread the technology more widely. Rainbow Power has two subsidiaries: Energy From Nature Home Pty Ltd and an export subsidiary company Reshape Pty Ltd.



The Rainbow Power Company factory and show room at 1 Alternative Way, Nimbin.
Photo from Rainbow Power Company website.

The business has expanded from its beginnings at market-day stalls. For a time they rented a space at the Birth and Beyond premises, then purchased a small building at the other end of the street.²⁸¹ Later they raised money through shares and loans, designing and building their 700 square metre factory and showroom at number 1 Alternative

²⁸¹ Now the Nimbin Pizzeria & Trattoria.

Way.²⁸² Their workshop-showroom building is an example of theory in action: built to a passive solar design, it also generates power from banks of photovoltaic (solar) panels on the roof, two wind mills and a wood-fired steam generator. Surplus power is sold to the national grid through a grid-interactive system: the Rainbow Power Company was the first place I encountered a power meter running *backwards*.

The Rainbow Power Company was incorporated in July 1987 as a limited liability company. Most of the workers at Rainbow Power migrated to Nimbin from city areas and the majority of them live on intentional communities.

Many people dream of turning that engrossing hobby into self-employment, but find their path blocked by high living costs. The alternative way to creating your own work is to bring your ideas and savings to a low cost area like Nimbin, where self-build housing and inexpensive multiple occupancy shares will leave you with capital left over to invest in your own business. The Rainbow Power Company had such beginnings.

Nimbin & Environs, No. 2, 1993, 28

In 1999, the Rainbow Power Company had around 15 workers, three of whom were fulltime and the rest part-time and casual.²⁸³ The business has a profit-sharing set-up, and two-thirds of the present workforce are shareholders.²⁸⁴ The people who work there are paid the same regardless of the work they do for the company, and there is a very flat management structure.²⁸⁵

²⁸² The street address of the business again shows the alternative culture and its use of language and icons.

²⁸³ In November 1996 the Rainbow Power Company had 18 workers, and was the biggest single non-government employer in the town.

²⁸⁴ In May 1995, Rainbow Power had in total around 100 shareholders. "Shareholders back Rainbow Power Company management," *Northern Star*, 2 May 1995.

²⁸⁵ Pedals, *Energy From Nature*, 1996, 5.

Possibly the most telling fact about the establishment of the Rainbow Power Company in Nimbin is that all the necessary skills were already available in the area to begin the business. The chances that people with the skills to create such a business in the “average” Australian village of its size are next to nil. This says something about the population that has migrated to Nimbin, and about how the alternative culture can enable this kind of development in a way that an old-fashioned capitalist ethos would not permit.

It all started to fall into place in about April 1987 when we held a meeting of all interested individuals and we realised we had all the skills available to us to put the idea into action. Our unanimous response was “Let’s create the Company that will employ us” and “Let’s make sure that we get the Company structure and work environment such that we can feel that the job is the ideal job for all of us.”

Pedals, *Energy From Nature*, 1996, 6.

Sources of income

Rainbow Power has an annual turnover of around A\$1 million.²⁸⁶ At the moment formal education and training courses comprise a small part of the income of the Rainbow Power Company, accounting for approximately 1-2% of their income. Another 2% or so comes from consultancy. The rest of their revenue comes from the sale of alternative power equipment.²⁸⁷

However the real strength of the company is its low exposure to on-going expenses. Their low expenses – low wages, low mortgage and low overheads – enable the company to survive periods of low income. Their self-sufficiency in power helps make it possible to continue to operate during “down” times. The fact that the factory is situated in the rural periphery means that ground rent (reflected in the price of land in this case) is cheaper too. We can see evidence of a community spirit in the form of free labour to

²⁸⁶ “Kali on Alternative Energy,” *Nimbin News*, August–September 1998, 6.

²⁸⁷ Dave Lambert, Personal Communication, 14 May 1999.

build the factory, the resourcefulness of the alternative culture and pro-recycling ethos. Not many factory premises are even part-built by voluntary labour in Australia.

We moved onto a block of land which we got quite cheaply ... and built that factory unbelievably cheaply thanks to a lot of free labour and very intelligent decision making ... All the glass for the windows, for example, we got for three hundred dollars from the demolition in Casino. [Kali McLaughlin.]

“Kali on Alternative Energy,” *Nimbin News*, August–September 1998, 6.

The lower cost of living means that paying low wages is both possible (you can live on it) and has an ideology that sustains it. The non-materialistic lifestyle of the Rainbow Power workers is supported by the alternative community and its ideological practices.

The residence of many of the workers on multiple occupancy properties also means that they get to work on providing the

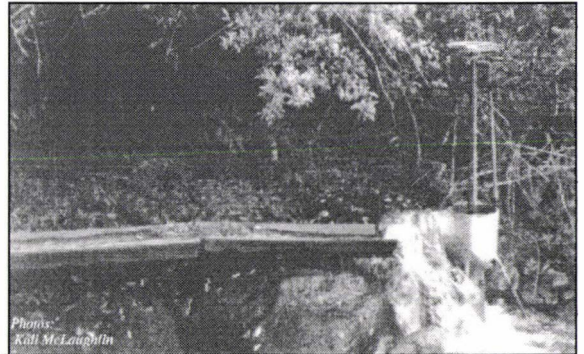
power needs of their own households and communities. The experience of living with alternative power technology as their sole energy source on a daily basis means that there is a domestic impetus to constantly improve, develop and innovate.

I was developing more the idea of micro-grid, a way of distributing power, which we'd been trying out on Tumble successfully, and also windmills. ... I'd been playing around at home on weekends and days off ... [Kali McLaughlin.]

“Kali on Alternative Energy,” *Nimbin News*, August–September 1998, 6.

We had many of the products and ideas and we had the experience of setting up our own and neighbours' power systems. Collectively, we had many skills in the Nimbin area, including the ability to come up with an idea and carry it through to a prototype and eventually production line and sales.

Pedals, *Energy From Nature*, 1996, 6.



Photos:
Kali McLaughlin

This water-powered pump, designed and manufactured by Kali McLaughlin, is an example of how solving their domestic needs can lead to inventions. This hydroelectric pelton wheel is one of a number of inventions manufactured by the Rainbow Power Company. Photo: Kali McLaughlin [1998 Visions of Nimbin fund-raising calendar.]

Again we see the phenomenon of paid work arising from the skills learned from resolving the problems that they themselves encountered in their domestic lives – in this case, the provision of power.

Ideological support for the business

The following excerpt from their book, *Energy From Nature*, shows the moral and ideological justifications for lower wages than would be enjoyed by an energy development team in a fully mainstream capitalist enterprise.

Everyone should have the right to be gainfully employed in an industry that has SOUND ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL OBJECTIVES and knowing that THE WORLD IS IN CRISIS one may need to be prepared to accept a lower wage level, at least until the industry can survive an increase in wages.

Pedals, *Energy From Nature*, 1996, 6. [Emphasis in original.]

The next quote takes us from the ideological and qualitative to the economic, and expresses why people migrate to the area to enjoy a better way of life, even though many will make considerably less money than if they had stayed in the city. The following quote puts a material value on the aesthetics of country living for alternative lifestyle migrants.

In the Rainbow Region a low wage is offset by other factors such as fresh air, friendly neighbours, salubrious climate, great views and a commonality of purpose in our local villages that are inaccessible at any price to workers in major cities. Most of the staff at the Rainbow Power Company also live on Multiple Occupancies with no power bills (we supply our own power, water and sewerage) and low rural rates. Operating out of a small village ensures comparatively low overheads for the Company.

Pedals, *Energy From Nature*, 1996, 6.

The Rainbow Power Company also enjoys unusually high levels of recognition from official state bodies for an enterprise of their size. This recognition suggests more money has been delivered to the Rainbow Power Company by government agencies in the

shape of research contracts and so on than actually has in reality.²⁸⁸ It also explains my over-estimation of the economic role of such payments from the state in the economy of Rainbow Power. This has worked in much the same way that the alternative ideology promotes the idea of communalism beyond its factual material importance. The number of people who *actually* live on communities is tiny in contrast to the *popular conception* of how alternative lifestyle participants live – mention alternative lifestyles and people immediately talk about communes.

Rainbow Power's competitors

Competition for the sale of alternative energy systems comes from other companies similar to Rainbow Power, not from the big business players. When it comes to sales, the bulk of it is the low-level retail trade. This market is presently very tight. In the four years between 1994 and 1998 the shipments of photovoltaic modules have doubled while the domestic market for alternative energy technology has contracted.²⁸⁹

In the beginning, Rainbow Power operated in the same space in terms of research and development as other developers of *end-user* commodities from standard components. The big companies really operate in a different sphere as far as competition goes, and they should be seen more, not as competition for Rainbow Power, but as suppliers, and as potential customers or beneficiaries of Rainbow Powers research and development effort in developing end-user retail products and services. For example, Rainbow Power is not likely to be developing better silicon wafers, but making better use of them. In recent years the development side of the business has been de-emphasised on account of its reduced profitability.

²⁸⁸ See CORE MEANINGS IN ALTERNATIVE IDEOLOGY: Autonomy and Handouts, page 344.

²⁸⁹ Reshape-Rainbow Power Company Email Newsletter, N°. 9, 20 May 1998.

Training and public education

An associate company, Energy From Nature Home Pty Ltd has designed and delivers a high-quality teaching module.

Energy From Nature runs training courses, ranging from 12-hour adult education through to four-week intensive courses.

They also run industry accreditation

courses for the Solar Energy Industry Association of Australia (SEIAA). The course can be partly done by correspondence, and is designed for electricians seeking national accreditation.



Photo of portable training module from the Rainbow Power Company Web-site.

Energy From Nature also has a purpose-built mobile training module, which makes its own power and demonstrates different kinds of power generation according to the specific needs of the user and the power sources available to them.²⁹⁰

Our unparalleled commitment to education, demonstration and innovation provides Australia with a world-class display that received over 50,000 visitors a year and was recently awarded a Distinction in the North Coast Tourism Awards.

Rainbow Power Company Website.²⁹¹

The Rainbow Power Company is conscious of the real and potential impact of their energy solutions. They talk about how such solutions are appropriate for remote and environmentally sensitive areas, and they advertise to eco-tourist resorts that alternative power is a good way to demonstrate commitment to the environment. They are also aware of the impact for third world development. These technologies lead to independent self-sustaining power supply for third world people who manage to obtain this equipment, either by purchase or in the form of foreign aid.

²⁹⁰ <http://www.rpc.com.au/profile.html>

²⁹¹ <http://www.rpc.com.au/profile.html>. The demonstration project was funded from a federal government grant from the now disbanded Energy Research Development Corporation.

In Australia and overseas, Microgrids can be an appropriate solution to power distribution problems. Small villages can pool resources and funding to provide power for everyone ... Responsibility for power distribution can be assigned to a trained individual or an organisation.

Rainbow Power Company brochure "Microgrids," Issue No. 2, 20/11/94

The Rainbow Power Company has another subsidiary, Reshape Pty Ltd, which exports overseas. It provides independent power technologies for small communities and enterprises. Their web-site lists power for medical clinics and solar-powered water pumping in Papua New Guinea, emergency communications supply in Somalia, hydro-generated power for communities in Ecuador, solar-powered electric fencing in France, and for solar-power to run giant clam farms in the Solomon Islands.²⁹²

10.1.1 A wider analysis

Here I give an overview to the position of the Rainbow Power Company within the global and local economies. I look at Rainbow Power's links to the city and how the company is situated within a core-periphery framework, and examine the claim that industries like the Rainbow Power Company function as *think tanks* for energy capital and government.

The Rainbow Power Company is part of an urban industry, based on urban technologies. The alternative power industry is an outgrowth of domestic technology that has anticipated a major need. Yet its growth as a domestic technology, coupled with the alternative cultural imperative of workplace autonomy, means that they are unlikely to capitalise on this technology. In fact the low capital investment (financial independence) caps the likely growth of Rainbow Power Company and other organisations like it, and at the same time makes their continued survival possible, even without significant growth.

We were basically not moving fast enough on the ground. All these other competitors were moving up. The oil companies were moving onto the scene. We

²⁹² <http://www.rpc.com.au/profile.html>

were not going to be the big wholesalers and that had been one of the dreams. ... However, the renewable technology, which has so far been a bit of an underachiever, was now starting to come into standard industry quality. We could have actually made a bid as manufacturers at that point. Instead the opposite decision was made and the manufacturing side was closed down.

“Kali on Alternative Energy,” *Nimbin News*, August–September 1998, 6.

The above quote points to the pressure from bigger companies, and to the under-capitalisation of businesses like Rainbow Power when it comes to manufacturing. The quote also shows different expectations of what Rainbow Power should seek to achieve, and different judgements within the workers and shareholders group about what should be attempted.

For most industries, the ratio of investment capital from finance companies to capital put forward by the business is about 50:50. This ratio of debt to equity is much lower for the Rainbow Power Company, and means that they own more of their business than other companies. This happens for two reasons. The first is that such companies often find it hard to borrow money from standard loan institutions on account of their ownership and management structures, not to mention their marginal profits. This is where ethical business investments can potentially make a difference.²⁹³ Second, the mistrust of dependency on an outside body, the loss of workplace autonomy, and the high cost of debt-servicing mean that such companies do not want to borrow money from banks.

Rainbow Power is structured so that after expenses are paid, shareholders get returns on their investment on a share-profit basis with the workers. The semi-capitalist status of Rainbow Power is seen by the fact that although the shareholders have a vote, in practice they receive little (or no) income from their shares. Similarly, it is semi-capitalist in so far as the shareholders do not control the company to the exclusion of the workers. Neither do they maximise profit because the enterprise is oriented to paying the

²⁹³ See also CORE MEANINGS IN ALTERNATIVE IDEOLOGY: Reciprocity and co-operation, page 346.

wages of the workers. These features are in contrast to the “normal” capitalist mode and make the Rainbow Power company a semi-co-operative, semi-capitalist enterprise.

It is this semi-capitalist mode of production that both allows the company to survive and also prevents it from growing larger. Were Rainbow Power to grow larger, for example, if it were to become a manufacturing plant, it would require access to large amounts of capital. It could acquire access to capital via connection with investment organisations that would transform Rainbow Power into a fully capitalist enterprise. It would have to be sold (mortgaged) to a bank or to some other capitalist enterprise (who would on-sell it to the banks through securities on loans.)

Despite their relative autonomy, Rainbow Power is still vulnerable to macro-economic fluctuations. This exposure to macroeconomics can be most easily demonstrated by looking at factors external to the business that play a part in the profitability of the business. International money markets impact on costs, as well as the degree of investment made in manufacturing plant in core-components of solar systems. For instance, the price of photovoltaic cells is affected by the exchange rate between the Australian and American dollar. Compliance with Australian regulations to reduce electromagnetic output has driven up the price of some items.

10.1.2 Subsidies and Rainbow Power

One thing that struck me about the Rainbow Company is their ability to attract government money. Many of their contracts, grants, loans, special projects, and joint ventures are with the state sector. For example, Rainbow Power (or its subsidiaries) was funded to the tune of \$165,000 over the two years 1996-97 to undertake several projects for NSW Sustainable Energy Development Authority (SEDA).²⁹⁴ These contracts with the government sector, grants and subsidies partly explain how it is that the Rainbow Power Company can survive. This points to their more “urban” position within a core-

²⁹⁴ Information from SEDA in answer to an email enquiry.

periphery system than their geographic location in Nimbin would suggest. Rainbow Power is linked to urban centres economically despite their physical separation.

Income from power generation

The other source of income that I was keen to evaluate concerned the grid-interactive system at Rainbow Power. The grid interactive system is a means whereby Rainbow Power can either draw power from the main grid, or sell power into it. SEDA contracted with Rainbow Power to install a grid-interactive system as a demonstration model. Rainbow Power presently gets retail prices for the electricity they generate and return to the grid. They do this through “net billing” – power generation put back into the system is held as a credit and comes off the bill when it’s in debit.²⁹⁵ My notes from a field trip had suggested to me that generating power and selling it back into the national grid might turn out to be a more significant source of cash income for the company.

They have applied to sell back power into the national grid at \$1 a kilowatt, when the maximum purchase rate is 27c.

Fieldnotes, November 1996.

Because Rainbow Power was getting *retail* prices for the electricity that they generated I anticipated that power generation might become a significant source of income, and secondly, that it represented an incentive subsidy from the power company. As it turns out, getting retail prices for electricity generation is a minor subsidy.

This is a benefit deriving from state ownership of the national grid. If the power supply company was privately owned and controlled it is likely that Rainbow Power would pay *retail* prices for the energy they use, and receive *wholesale* prices for the energy that they produce.

As it turned out, Rainbow Power does not have a formal agreement with the power company. “However, the verbal understanding is net billing to break even, then we get

²⁹⁵ Dave Lambert, Personal Communication, 23 April 1999.

paid the same as they pay for coal fired power.” Dave Lambert put quotes around my description of net billing as a subsidy when he replied, “The ‘subsidy’ from North Power would be less than a couple of hundred dollars per year.” Again I had thought it was financially more significant than it turned out to be. Because the grid-interactive system was a one-off demonstration model there are sound reasons for the power company to bill them through net billing. It is technically far simpler and cheaper to do so. It’s not so much that the power company wishes to give them this money so much as they want to have the grid-interactive system and this way had the lowest billing compliance cost. While I over-estimated the importance of this as cash income, power self-sufficiency is another way the company survives periods of low cash turnover.

Reticulation cross-subsidies

Not only has the consumption of “free” power become an option for cash-strapped alternative lifestyle participants, big power companies can see benefits for themselves. They can provide power to out of the way communities/homesteads by installing (or encouraging the installation) of reliable “alternative” power supplies instead. Reticulation costs the user somewhere in the vicinity of A\$10-\$15,000 a kilometre to install. After this however, the power company maintains the lines. Installing alternative power generators means the overall “delivery” cost of power should drop for the mainstream as well as doing away with the need to string power-lines for miles across the countryside and maintain them.

For Queensland residents, the government has recently announced a rebate of 75% on Renewable Energy components (including solar panels, hydro generators, batteries and inverters). The installation must not be connected to the grid; however there is neither a minimum distance (or cost) to the grid nor is there a minimum expenditure required.

Dave Lambert, Personal Communication, 13 May 1999.

The solar and hydropower equipment supplied by the Rainbow Power Company complies with the requirements of the Office of Energy for use under the Remote Area Power Assistance Scheme in New South Wales. These subsidies are a basically *rural*

subsidies paid by the New South Wales and Queensland state governments, although there will be a small number of urban beneficiaries.

Because rural power supplies are expensive to maintain these technologies represent a saving for the big power supply companies. If the energy industry is privatised and the state gets out of power distribution, then these rural supplies become a drain on the profit for the power company, and they won't be willing to cross-subsidise from urban users. Shareholder pressure will require them to "rationalise" their power supply, and in a free market environment they would have to introduce "user pays" and charge rural consumers more for their power.

It should also be pointed out that equal line charges are a subsidy *against* alternative power, and hence, there is no genuine relative price for grid versus alternative power. Both are greatly affected by customary (not market) practices and prices. In other words, the equal power charge for remote users is a price derived from customary practice, not a user-pays price. It is in this sense that Rainbow Power are quite correct in rejecting the analysis of income from the state as subsidies because there isn't a clear market price to begin with.

Sales subsidies

In NSW, residents can obtain a grant to help them afford sustainable power supplies. The rebate comes from the Sustainable Energy Development Authority, and can be quite significant. A purchase of 500W solar panels entitles the buyer to a \$1200 rebate. There are other incentives: for example, the purchase of washing machines with low power and water requirements are encouraged with both local and state rebates. In order to promote alternative energy use, in December 1997 SEDA offered a \$500 rebate to the first 2000 customers who purchased an approved solar or heat pump system for hot

water heating.²⁹⁶ This sales subsidy accounted for around a quarter of the total purchase cost of the system at the time.

Unlike grants and contracts, these subsidies pay Rainbow Power no more than they pay other retailers (and manufacturers) of power equipment. Rainbow Power is technically correct in not seeing these as subsidies because sales subsidies that make alternative energy technology affordable are a benefit received by the customers. However, sales subsidies also mean that the retail arms of alternative power companies are kept viable. Without subsidies they would experience a slump in sales as they did in 1995 when a government subsidy ceased, because alternative power technology is more expensive than standard energy appliances.²⁹⁷

Benefits as worker subsidies

The workers at Rainbow Power can survive bouts of unemployment, and join for a time the reserve army of *co-operative* labour. I describe it as the reserve army of co-operative labour because most of these workers are not available for the standard capitalist reserve army unless they migrate back to the cities. A skilled alternative lifestyle participant who is part of the Rainbow Power Company can actually move out of the company into this rural reserve army of labour and back.

The unemployment benefit can be seen as an invisible state subsidy for the business because a period of unemployment will not cost the company the skills of that worker. The worker will remain in Nimbin and if necessary the state will support them on a

²⁹⁶ The rationale was that water heating can account for up to 50% of a household's energy usage, and converting to a solar system can save between one and two tonnes of greenhouse gas a year. At the time, only 4% of households in NSW had solar hot water heating. "Get \$500 off your new solar hot water system." *Nimbin News*, December 1977-January 1998, 21.

²⁹⁷ The cessation of a government subsidy scheme was one of the factors identified for the fall in sales at a Rainbow Power Company shareholders meeting in May 1995. "Shareholders back Rainbow Power Company management," *Northern Star*, 2 May 1995.

benefit until the company has work for them again. This “subsidy” doesn’t apply to workers in the cities, and is one of the unique aspects of the Rainbow Power Company setting up in Nimbin. City businesses derive a general benefit from the large reserve army of (mostly unskilled) labour. For industries utilising skilled workers, though, considerable costs are incurred recruiting and retaining workers. It is these kinds of costs that are not faced by businesses like the Rainbow Power Company. Again, the alternative ideology provides a legitimating support for this kind of employment by not stigmatising beneficiaries.

Subsidies in general

It turns out that incentive subsidies made directly to Rainbow Power make a relatively small contribution to the company balance sheets. In 1997 funding from SEDA comprised around 11.5% of their annual turnover, up from 1996 when the contribution that SEDA contracts made was more in the range of 6%.²⁹⁸

The issue of state sector subsidies to Rainbow Power turned out to be a complex one – not only because of the complexities of the company having subsidiaries, but over what actually constituted a subsidy.²⁹⁹

I think that subsidies are made to seem more important in the local alternative discourse that mentions these relationships to demonstrate Rainbow Power’s credibility and social recognition as experts. By talking about contracts with the state, and about grants and awards won, Rainbow Power is positioned in the public imagination as successful and necessary. The locals are proud of Rainbow Power and always point to it as an example of the “good things” that the alternative lifestyle has achieved, and the company has a

²⁹⁸ Information from SEDA in answer to an email inquiry, and combined with information available in the public arena regarding the annual turnover of the RPC.

²⁹⁹ This will be discussed further in *CORE MEANINGS IN ALTERNATIVE IDEOLOGY: Autonomy and handouts*, page 342.

huge importance as an icon of alternative innovation. Like the Rainbow Café, the Rainbow Power Company engenders a sense of community ownership.³⁰⁰

A global perspective

The Rainbow Power case study forms the basis of a wider study of the whole core-periphery relationship. The case study allows me to discuss things concretely as well as theoretically. The energy industry, via the issue of global warming, allows me to discuss global capitalism and to situate Nimbin's status within an even larger context.

In areas where Nimbin has been seen as a pioneer of sustainable regional economic activity, such as the groundbreaking Rainbow Power Company, the centralisation and corporatisation of trade has meant many of these smaller players are constantly disadvantaged by government policy and up against the wall financially. [Bob Hopkins.]

"On to the Millenium," *Nimbin News*, December 1998-January 1999, 3.

Focussing on the energy industry is useful because as a case study it provides a mass of material that links the micro-economic processes within Nimbin to the macro-processes of the world energy industry.³⁰¹

There is a good reason for linking the global warming section with the energy industry. The energy industry provides a context to discuss the wider macro-economic context of the alternative lifestyle because the energy industry is behind the major environmental problem of our time. Global warming is primarily *caused* by the energy industry – it is oil and coal-based energy that is the single most significant cause of global warming. That is why it is relevant to discuss it here, rather than just seeing it as a general component of alternative environmental politics. It also links the political interests of

³⁰⁰ Remember too, that voluntary labour went into constructing the factory.

³⁰¹ There are similar points that could be made about big capital and mining and the rainforest, and they are the same kinds of processes. In order to talk about the environment in general versus capitalist development in general you would have to analyse all of the inter-related processes and impacts of mining, of agriculture, of forestry, of urban development.

the alternative lifestyle participants, and the outcomes of their struggle to protect the environment to the material and economic milieus from which they emerged, and which impact upon them.

It is an example of how global politics comes all the way through to “independent” businesses in Nimbin. There is a very clear chain – in this case from BP starting with global production of oil, its need to develop alternative power, removal to Pacific region, as consumer of government subsidies through to its final appearance as a supplier for an industry in Nimbin.

We don't make solar panels; we buy them from BP Solar. ... [A]bout 60% of the world production of PV is from oil companies. They are involved for a variety of reasons—profit, greenie points, etc.³⁰²

Dave Lambert, Personal Communication, 13 May 1999.

The government subsidies to BP are, ironically, what determines Rainbow Power's possibilities. Rainbow Power has access to alternative power subsidies because BP successfully lobbied the government to get those subsidies, not because Rainbow Power has any influence at all. The relationship of the state, the oil companies and alternative power was formed by those companies, and on a much larger scale. That constitutes a (business) environment in which Rainbow Power operates as a retailer in a subsidised industry at the end of a series of economic relations.

Rainbow Power Company – Summary

The Rainbow Power Company survives on account of their unique positioning. It is a consequence of the migration of a particular cohort of urban white-collar workers, to their ideological practices such as ethical business structures, to their rural location and to their ownership of their labour and means of production. These are cases where ideology can direct and inform the manner in which a business operates (but not if it operates, which of course is an economic question).

³⁰² PV stands for photo voltaic.

The fact is that Rainbow Power workers can be in transit between employment and unemployment at all times. There is a group of persons, who, when they temporarily run out of work at Rainbow Power, do not become available for capitalist employment, and are not typically part of the standard reserve army of labour. The benefit peasantry can serve as the reserve army of labour for Rainbow Power in a way that they do not serve as reserve army of labour for capitalist production. In this way, the unemployment benefit can act as a subsidy for the enterprise.³⁰³

The people who engage in research and development work at places like Rainbow Power are often not fully compensated for the full value (potential profit) of their work. Their labour is not being charged at the (urban) market rate, and they are effectively subsidising the research and development efforts of city companies. The dependencies of this industry are clearly demonstrated by looking at who does the initial feasibility research and the development of prototypes, and who stands to gain from the industrial development of this technology.

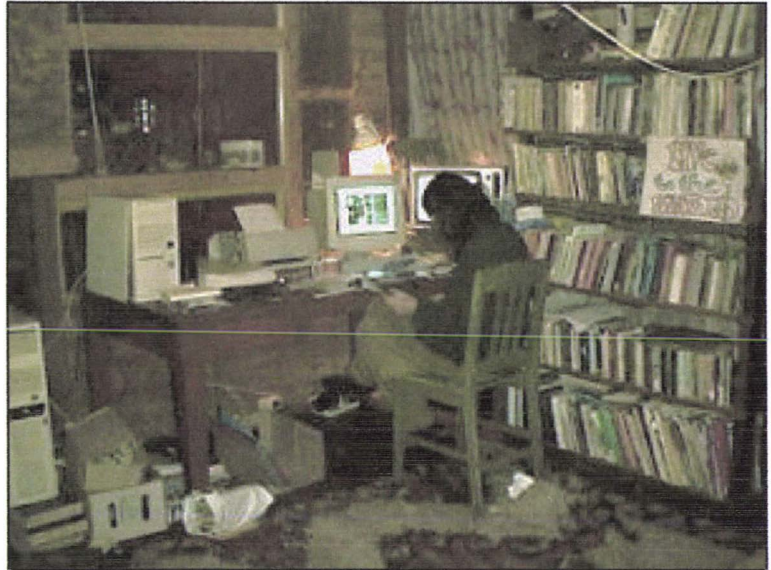
It is a simple matter to relate the global energy market to the situation faced by the Rainbow Power Company. The issue of greenhouse gas emissions and alternative energy demonstrates many of the macro-environmental and macro-economic features of the core-periphery process, and again gives us a clear link to pro-environment activity in Nimbin. Rainbow Power is a retailer and it sits on one end of a supply chain: at the other end is the oil conglomerate, British Petroleum (BP). Since BP is in fact the main supplier of Rainbow Power's solar modules, we can see how the core-periphery dependency relationship enacted in this simple example.

³⁰³ See RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT WORK: Benefits as worker subsidies, page 316.

10.2 Computer-based work

Computing work – programming, desktop publishing, computer graphics and the creation of websites – is a good example of the type of skilled work that can be rusticated. The growth of this industry in Nimbin is a product of two (major) interacting phenomena. First, improved communications, most notably in telecommunications and transport linkages. Second, affordable personal computers. The alternatives have turned to computing because it's a good example of the kind of industry they like: its small scale, it involves a minimal consumption of resources, its requirements of literacy and rational thought are things they have obtained, and it is interesting work to do.

The over-all education of the new settlers is vastly higher than for the national average. That is an advantage for them in the high tech sectors of the economy, such as computing. The Timothy Leary phenomenon, once *tune in, turn on, drop out* is now *plug in, turn on, boot up*. Many of the alternative



Computing: a home-based, self-directed form of employment.
Picture: Zenwatt website. (<http://gasgroup.com/zenwatt>)

lifestyle participants are computer literate and have access to personal computers.

Major advances in telecommunications have meant that people who work in the computing industry don't have to work and live permanently in the city areas any more.

Computer technology is an affordable means of production that can be used to generate high-paying self-employment.³⁰⁴

The thing I like about Nimbin is that everywhere else in the world I'd be sort of ratbag extremist, right out there with all the other loops. In Nimbin I'm fairly conservative. It's a good feeling. There's certainly nowhere else in Australia that I could feel that. There's probably nowhere else in the world. [Computer worker]

Sects, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

The population has increased. We've got a more varied population now, all the in-between people have arrived to fill in the gap between the hippies and the red-necks, and we've got computer programmers out there and all sorts of unusual occupations.

Interview with Bob McKay, July 1996.

What Bob McKay means by "unusual occupations" in the above quote is that they are occupations that were unusual for rural Australia. In December 1998, there were two places in Nimbin where the general public could connect to the net: at the bookshop, Perceptio, and at the Espresso Bar. In addition the Neighbourhood Centre was offering free internet access to job seekers. There are now many more places, including a suite of six computers in the Community Centre, offering computing time. This density of internet access is at inner-city levels.

With the development of the internet the world is at the fingertips of the computer literate in a way that was previously unavailable, and users are able to put themselves "out there" inexpensively too. The class background of the alternative lifestyle population means there is a core group who could justifiably be described as "information junkies," and for them the development of the internet has been a major boon. The local libraries, one of the previous sources of information, were well used,

³⁰⁴ For some people, income from sale of pot funded their first computer purchase.

but just can't compete with the stunning array of information and ideas available over the web, and very cheaply.³⁰⁵

There are two websites that "introduce" Nimbin, and the servers that run them are both domiciled in cities – one in Brisbane and the other in Sydney.³⁰⁶ The fact that these websites are hosted in the cities, and updated remotely from Nimbin, shows that fact that this industry is an extension of an urban technology.

Many of the local traders advertise on the internet, for example, Nimbin Candles, the hemp clothing business Wicked Weave and Rainbow Power Company. Local entertainment groups like *Coral Spawn*, *The Pagan Love Cult*, and the *Spliff Masters* marketed their newly released CDs over the internet. The Bush Traks recording studio is itself offered for sale on the internet. Accommodation providers and real estate businesses have made extremely good use of the net. Importantly, the internet is a valuable organisational tool for alternative lifestyle participants too, as I will show in the section, CLASS FOR ITSELF.

Nimbin has a big presence on the net for a little town. Using a common search-engine, AltaVista, in October 1997 I found 34 sites containing the word "Nimbin." The same search resulted in just over 500 hits on January 26, 1999. Two months later, the search yielded 998 hits, and a week after that 1225. By November 1999, the search located 1642 sites. By 1 September 2000 the same search yielded 4888 hits. This is massive growth, even by internet standards.³⁰⁷

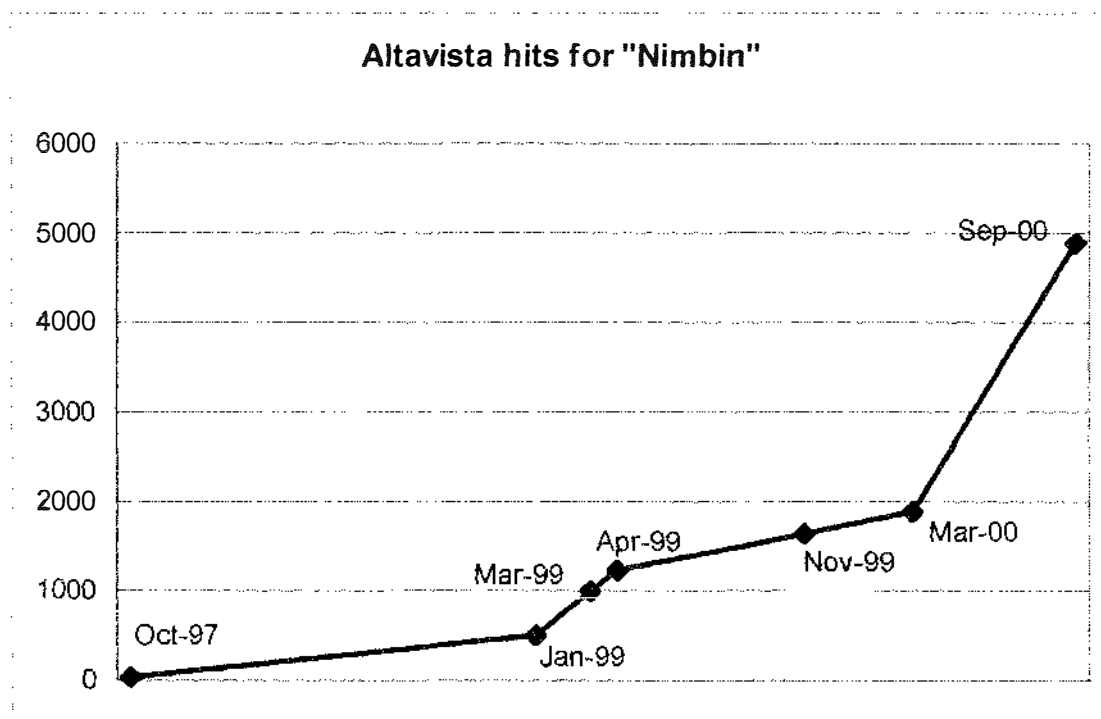
³⁰⁵ In 1982 Nimbin people formed a group to try to get a library for Nimbin, rather than just the weekly book bus (mobile library) from the Lismore Public Library. *Nimbin Newsletter*. No. 19, 14 January 1982, 6. These days the pressure is on for public-access internet time as well.

³⁰⁶ See <http://www.nimbin.net> and <http://www.nimbinaustralia.com>

³⁰⁷ It is impossible to tell how much of this increase is an artifact of improvements of search engine: the performance of AltaVista was upgraded in the interim.

Web-hits per capita

I have surveyed the number of web hits on local towns. The search was done in mid-October 1999 using the Alta Vista search engine and the number of hits was logged. This number was divided by the population figures available on the internet for those towns and localities.



This survey had to take into account the potential ambiguity of using names of some of the nearby towns, such as Green Pigeon, Grevillia and Casino, that share their name with other entities. These had to be dropped from the comparison and I limited the search to town and locality names that uniquely refer to local places. Helpfully one of the features of this area is that the names of many of the local towns have no other significance on the internet because the Aboriginal languages that created these names are very localised. Therefore this is a data-gathering technique that is not necessarily replicable in other places.



The huge difference in the number of “internet hits” per person in Nimbin is shown in the chart above. The uniquely identified nearby towns and villages are listed in order of their population. Nimbin is one of the smaller of these it still has more than five times the number of hits per resident than does the city of Lismore, a university town.³⁰⁸

Repatriated industry

While only a few Nimbin people were computer programming on contract for organisations located in Sydney in the early 1980s, recent improvements in

³⁰⁸ Even with the limited number of data points, the iso-web-hits per capita has produced a map that is strikingly similar to the voting maps showing progressive voting pressures in the area. See CLASS FOR ITSELF: Iso-votes, page 455.

telecommunications make this kind of work more viable.³⁰⁹ Now the internet is widely available, it is also easier to find and to service clients. The arrival of industries that have been moved out from the core to the periphery, such as computer consultancy, represent a classic of stage III core-periphery theory.

In mid-1998 I met a couple who work as computer consultants to big companies. They had just moved from Sydney onto land near Nimbin. Rather than telling their clients they had moved, they simply redirected their internet mail and of course their cell-phone number has remained the same. For anything that requires hands-on attention, they simply get on one of the 24 flights to Sydney a week and sub-contract one of their former employees in Sydney to deal with it until they arrive. Again this points to historical core-periphery factors: if their clients had been in another state, for example in Brisbane, it would be a great deal less convenient for them to get there. By moving to the country their rental costs have dropped. By changing their workers from employees to labour-only contractors, they save themselves huge amounts in wages, and in the compliance costs of being an employer. Here the “repatriation” of core industries is the driving force for the migration *as well as* their version of the “professional’s escape.”

The race to get computer technology Year-2000 compliant threw into focus several of the issues this thesis addresses. An article in the *Australian Financial Review* reports:

Back from the hills of Nimbin to the big bucks [come] Cobol programmers, who a few years ago struggled to find a few unglamorous jobs maintaining mainframes are now asking – and getting – up to \$200 an hour.

Australian Financial Review, April 20, 1998.³¹⁰

This short quote is interesting for several reasons. First, it betrays the prejudice that somehow alternative lifestyle participants have no right to be well paid. Second, it

³⁰⁹ My partner Brendan Tuohy did contract work for an engineering firm in Sydney in 1984 and delivered the code via modem to his client.

³¹⁰ Echoed on Gary North’s Y2K Links and Forums website. The original Australian Financial Review link was <http://www.afr.com.au/content/980420/survey/index.html>

shows that the now-dated skills of computer-industry workers who left the cities to live in Nimbin have been preserved in such rural pockets, and have unexpectedly become valuable again through a shortage of certain types of Cobol programming skills.³¹¹ In part this shortage has been caused by the re-training of the rest of the computer programmers (and of their progression through the hierarchies of their workplaces from lowly programmers into executive management positions), and the training of new computer workers in second and third generation computer languages instead.

The fact of their migration to Nimbin with Cobol skills, and their residence there, has meant that these programmers are suddenly available (at the right price) as a reserve army of labour for this crisis. They will migrate temporarily from the Nimbin hills to perform this work and earn enough money to make it worth their while.

Computer-based learning

The educational philosophy that learning should be self-paced and enjoyable is much easier to achieve in practice with computers in schools, and I think there will be a significant industry based on computer technology arising in this area. A couple of local teenage programmers, Heya Gosper and Luke Hopkins have produced a computer game, Sk8 and Cre8, that has the player skate-boarding through the (virtual) streets of Nimbin. They have coupled their creative talents to their interests in skateboarding and computer games, and have created the perfect learning environment with expert tutors.³¹²

³¹¹ It was not a Cobol programming shortage as such, but a shortage of people who had used particular Cobol environments and compilers. Each type of mainframe had its own operating system and compiler that were used in the software maintenance process. These mainframes are now aged. Programmes that have run flawlessly for 15-20 years or so may not have ever been adequately documented, and sometimes both hardware and software manuals have been lost during the passage of time. This means that the people with the required skills could command high wages.

³¹² True to the anti-monopoly sentiments of the alternative culture, the creators of the Virtual Nimbin warn users not to use a particular Microsoft product. "We don't recommend anyone

At the end of 1998, the Nimbin Cultural Industry Training Advisory Committee was formed to provide more training experiences for students at Nimbin Central School. It adopted the National Entertainment Industry Training Package and the Music Industry Skills Curriculum as the standards frameworks for its own development.³¹³ The purpose of this is to structure and recognise the skills development of Nimbin people in these formerly extra-curricular activities.

People in the Nimbin area are sharing their computing knowledge. Not only are their skills utilised at the local schools, but they also offer on-line guides to creating websites and preparing material for publishing on the internet.

The next section deals with the cultural infrastructure and ties the expression of ideology back into a materialist framework.

use Microsuck Explorer, and if you do? Work it out for yourself.” Note too the rebranding of Microsoft to Microsuck.

³¹³ “Cultural Industry Training Advisory Committee,” *Nimbin News*, February–March 1999, 10.

SECTION V: CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Introduction to Cultural Infrastructure

In this section I show that what appears as personal choice is often predetermined by economic factors. The fact that individuals are actually making “compulsory” choices, choices from a restricted range, or choices from a wide range of which a few are rewarded disproportionately are often invisible to them.

[T]his class culture is not a neutral pattern, a mental category, a set of variables impinging [from] outside. It comprises experiences, relationships and ensembles of systematic types of relationship which not only set particular ‘choices’ and ‘decisions’ at particular times, but also structure, really and experientially, how these ‘choices’ come about and are defined in the first place.

Willis, *Learning to Labour*, 1977, 1.

The alternative lifestyle movement is not only about ideas: lifestyles are lived and they have a material existence outside the heads of the participants, and that material existence is based on physical and economic artefacts and conditions. In this section I look at how the alternative lifestyle participants enact their ideology and also at how the material, the physical and economic environment, acts upon that ideology.

Social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which mislead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.

Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx & Engels Selected Works Volume 1, 15. [Emphasis in original]

The Marxist approach is to see ideology as being the material objects people produce and practices that they undertake. The relevant material objects and practices are what define the ideology. Liberalism, for example, is liberal speech and liberal documents and liberal activities. It’s not the collection of individuals who identify themselves as liberals or are identified by others as liberals through some application of a set of attitudinal criteria, nor is it liberal ideas considered as abstractions.

When people speak about a person's political ideas in isolation they are really abstracting from the social existence of that individual, from the expression of that ideology within a definite social context. They first of all mentally place, for example, a putative liberal in a kind of Robinson Crusoe situation where their liberalism comes entirely from within and is then expressed. In reality, Robinson Crusoe could never have thought up a liberal ideology because it could never have developed within the isolated environment of a single self-reliant person. Liberalism can only ever arise in a social context.

The abstraction from social consciousness that is used within liberal conceptions of ideology is exactly what prevents them from understanding the phenomenon because if you want to understand how social consciousness determines individual consciousness, the moment you start thinking from the perspective of the individual consciousness you've ruled out the possibility of a factual solution.

Here I am talking about what is real and basic within an ideology – is it the thoughts that people have or is it the practices and material products that they produce along with those thoughts? Within the traditional liberal ideology, thoughts are primary and they are, for example, expressed within works of literature. That leads idealists to explain what people write from what they think, whereas the Marxist approach seeks to explain the individual consciousness from social consciousness.

Hence the liberal political ideas of a person could have never arisen independently of the social consciousness. They have actually been derived by the person thinking about and reading and arguing and discussing about liberal ideologies and institutions, and by participating in liberal ideological practices. In other words the practices and products have been primary to the formation of that individual's ideology, not the reverse. Social ideas are primary and individual ideas are secondary: that is where the Marxist notion actually captures the reality of ideology formation because it locates the primary direction of what needs to be explained and the way that things happen (causation) within the social structure.

Consciousness is primarily *social* consciousness and it is individual consciousness that needs to be explained, not the other way around. Moreover, the theory proceeds *from* social consciousness *to* individual consciousness and does not attempt to proceed from individual to social consciousness.

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

Marx, *Preface to The Critique of Political Economy*, 1977, Marx & Engels Selected Works Volume 1, 503.

Within such a theoretical structure, social consciousness is more real than individual consciousness and it is analogous to other scientific ideas. For example, a lot of people argued that electrons were not real, they were abstractions used to explain the real phenomena that were the operations of electrical circuits. As physics has developed, we've come to realise that electrons are more real (although we can't see them) and that, for example, chairs have a lower grade of reality than electrons because the superficial appearance of a chair depends on the existence of electrons but electrons don't depend upon chairs for their existence.

Ideologies do not live within individuals, they are a product of the interactions between people, and reflect very directly their material concerns. Ideas have a social meaning, a shared meaning, distinct from our personal perceptions of that meaning. We all "know" what, for example, a "decent" society is, even though it means a different thing to each of us. There is a recognised social meaning, a recognised core of meaning, which we can all relate to and that we've related our own understanding of that concept to.³¹⁴

Gramsci and uniting ideology

It can be instructive to compare the alternative ideology with Gramsci's analysis of the ideology of the Catholic Church in the middle ages.³¹⁵ During this period, extremely

³¹⁴ Volosinov, *Marxism and The Philosophy of Language*, 1973, 12.

³¹⁵ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 1983, 326-343.

different views and practices were unified under Catholicism. This “unity” of belief occurred even though the peasants and the ruling nobility had quite different economic concerns and beliefs. The views within the Catholic church of what the religion was about differed greatly by social class as well as between individuals, but nevertheless the church came to be a universal ideological structure in which people participated in a united way, and in which they all affirmed their belief.

The majority of the population in Medieval Europe believed in the church and the teachings of the church. The genius of the Catholic organisation was that it was able to produce a system of practices and rituals and liturgies in which those quite varying ideologies could find the means of their ideological sustenance and reproduction without fracture, although not without conflict (which was endemic: at one stage, for example, there were three popes).

It seems to me that it is necessary to look at an ideological structure in which there is diversity of meaning from two different perspectives, from the perspective of the individual, and from the perspective of it being part of a shared cultural understanding of the world.

The unity of the alternative ideologies is like the unity of the medieval Catholic church in which the different views of society and the church that were held by different social classes could be reconciled within a particular practice.

The difference lay in the way that they enacted and experienced their religion. Gramsci went so far as to suggest that it was like two religions with the same name. The base Catholic religion – the religion of the masses – consisted of a kind of simple-minded worship of a pantheon in which god played the chief role but in which there were other saints. People suffered on earth knowing that when they died they would go to heaven, which was in the sky. In the meantime they could pray to the Virgin Mary or another patron saint to intercede with God on their behalf.

Then there was the religion of the ruling class in which God played all the roles of the creator of the world, the arbiter of morals, and the orderer of honour and justice. Catholicism for the rich included the explication of problems such as why the music

produced by the turning of the celestial spheres was not audible and similar abstruse notions.

If you look at the Roman Catholicism of the medieval period you are led to ask the question: why did it break apart? Why did its ideological unity fracture? Why was it effectively split? Conflict arises when these differences come to reflect different material interests like the Protestant Reformation (or the so-called Catholic and Protestant “troubles” in Ireland). It was because the Protestant reformation was intimately bound up with the divergence of interests between the bourgeoisie and the classes over which they were hegemonic from the interests of the feudal nobility and the serfs who were subordinated to them.

Even today this unifying ideology is evident in the way in which the priests in the Sandanista regime and the Pope could both be Catholic. The Pope’s interests and the interests of the revolutionary Nicaragua regime were so clearly opposed. What that means is that ritual of Catholicism, as practiced by the Nicaraguan priests and the pope, has a certain unity. All the same its factual division in the sense of its opposition of the people who espouse it, means that ideological unity has to eventually rupture. What must come of it in the end is a schism, a new liberation Protestantism or an overthrow of the old regime within the Vatican by more liberal elements such as might have occurred under John Paul I.

The other thing is that people don’t actually have to believe in the actual literal “truth” of something in order to participate in the social and ritual life of that cultural practice. Consider the number of people who don’t think that the Bible is strictly “true” and yet would consider it to be “true” in other, symbolic sense, and participate in the life of the church. A good example of this is Lloyd Geering, a New Zealand theologian and former Principal of the Presbyterian College, who famously stated that he didn’t believe in the virgin birth or the resurrection, and that there is no afterlife. The significance of this interpretation (that it is symbolically true) is that it enables them to reconcile a shared cultural practice of actually attending church, partaking of the organisation of the church, with Christians who actually believe those myths as if they were facts.

There are many cultural practices that provide a core of meaning in alternative ideology. For me, this *core* of meaning is focussed on the material objects and practices that embody the ideology, not on particular persons and the ideas they hold in their heads about the world. These I will discuss in Chapter 11, **Core Meanings in Alternative Ideology**.

Chapter 11. Core Meanings in Alternative Ideology

11.0 Introduction

This chapter examines the cultural infrastructure and looks at alternative ideology from the point of its expression in practice, rather than as ideas in people's heads. It enables us to firmly identify the interaction between superstructure and the economic base. It examines ideologies within a Marxist framework and looks at the interaction between mainstream and the alternative mode of production, core-periphery process and how the most important elements of alternative ideologies are expressed in material terms.

I make a sharp distinction between my approach to the analysis of alternative ideology and the approach that other people have taken to the same phenomena. Ideological analysis is important to this thesis, not because ideology is the starting point or focus through which I have worked, but precisely because it is *not*. Again I take my cue from Marx.

Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production.

Marx, *Preface to The Critique of Political Economy*, 1977. Marx & Engels Selected Works Volume 1, 504.

The focus on the material features of the alternative lifestyle leads me to a clearer and more accurate analysis of the ideological situation of the alternative lifestyle group than an ideology-focussed analysis allows. By discussing ideology in a dialectical relationship with its material base, and as practices rather than just ideas in people's heads, I am able to get a better picture of ideology than if I had treated ideology as primary.

I identify some of the culturally important ideas that are presented by the alternative lifestyle culture, and the degree to which they are supported economically. Exemplars

are communal lifestyles, self-sufficiency, aspects of autonomy, practices of reciprocity and co-operation and green dollars (labour exchange) schemes.

11.1 Judging the determining power of ideology

While the alternative movement (being articulate and educated) was well able to represent itself to others, it was generally presented in an idealist rather than materialist manner. I judge the following quote, for example, to be fanciful. Peter Cock's comments were based more on the idea (vision) of what life in Nimbin could be like and less on how life actually was.

The Rainbow Region is an example of the development of dedicated people committed to create a survival culture. All had in common their involvement in a particular craft. However, in particular communities each specialised in order not to compete. All produced at least some of their necessary items of food, shelter, clothes. No one was self-sufficient, even with their reduced needs. Thus there remained a need to exchange. A co-operative lifestyle was evolving to the point where, if it was necessary, they could survive as a community without having to import or export to the corporate state. This was no mean accomplishment. What was beginning to evolve was not merely a survival culture, but experimentation with a wide-scale alternative society which had many elements.

Cock, *Alternative Australia*, 1979, 94.

Many of the alternative lifestyle theorists still approach their analysis of the alternative lifestyle from a superstructure perspective. First of all they become aware of the existence of a distinctive ideology. Then when they come to examine the material reality that underlies that ideology their attention is directed by features of the superstructure and they look at how people's *ideas* direct their activity. I argue that these theorists should look also at how those ideas are products of the time and economic resources of those participants in particular, and of the political economy of Australia in general. For these reasons I argue that the division that is commonly drawn between the participants in the alternative lifestyle movement, based on what they report as their primary reason for migrating, is actually an artificial one.

The dichotomy between participants who see alternative lifestyles as a positive choice and those who see it as the least negative choice, has also been described by

researchers such as Rigby (174a, 177). He used the terms “in order to” and “because of” to reflect what he perceived to be an essential difference between participants. Those motivated by the utopian desire to achieve new social realities, i.e. seeing an alternative lifestyle as the best choice, he calls “in order to.” These will be the same group we have identified in this research as having high levels of education and training, and who adopt an alternative lifestyle for positive reasons and hence have high levels of commitment. The group Rigby classed as “because of” would be the participants we have identified as having low levels of training, few other prospects, and who may feel that an alternative lifestyle provides a means of coping with an unjust world, but is not, in itself, inherently good. These participants Rigby observed to have lower levels of commitment.

Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 49.

Many researchers have accepted the explanations of some migrants without looking for the material basis that might inform those decisions. They tend to divide the alternative lifestyle population into people who have migrated “in order to” achieve some ideal goal and those who migrated “because of” negative factors in the city (urban poverty for example). I think this is an artificial construct, and argue that what unites them materially is far more relevant than what unites or divides them ideologically.

Ideology is not the main point; the alternative lifestyle participants share much more in common in the material sense than they do ideologically. I reject the notion that the many ideological differences they report about themselves somehow precludes an analysis of them as a social movement, or that those differences are particularly significant in class terms.

That is not to say that these ideological differences do not have significant effects on the way people behave. While the ideology of alternative lifestyle movement contains many nuances, and the economic positions of the people who live this lifestyle are not all exactly the same, they have enough in common so that the alternative ideology retains a set of core values that give it strength as a unifying force.³¹⁶

³¹⁶ This will be explored further in *CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE: United by cultural practice into a movement*, page 348.

The commune cult

The alternative lifestyle ideology makes a great deal of co-operation and community. Many theorists focus on communes and communities, even though the communitarian component of the alternative movement is numerically and economically less significant than the alternative lifestyle population who do not live on intentional communities.³¹⁷ This is an example of the gap between an ideology and its material instantiation. In their contribution to the book, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, Metcalf and Vanclay include research that shows an analysis of the figures for the alternative lifestyle participants separated from the mainstream population.

Ethnographies have tended to concentrate only on two dimensions of the movement; the rural spiritual and rural secular groups, to the exclusion of people living in politically motivated groups, those in urban communes and almost all sole householders.

Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 12. [Emphasis mine.]

It arrives in ideological practice almost as a cult of communal living. Communal living plays a much larger role in ideology than it does in real life. The alternative lifestyle participants who moved to the area and live in “sole households” just don’t feature in many studies. This is because, first, the methods chosen to study this population *focus on ideology*, and second, it is the consequence of the alternative cultural priority that emphasises communitarianism. Together with the difficulties defining the boundary of the alternative lifestyle communities, this means that they tend to exclude the sole-householder population from their consideration.

I suggest that the economic contribution to the area of the organised (intentional) communities is demonstrably less than the contribution of the non-commune dwelling alternative lifestyle participants, known as “sole householders,” who comprise the majority of the alternative population. Metcalf’s thesis, for instance, investigated the

³¹⁷ See, for example, Taylor, Metcalf, Metcalf & Vanclay, Cock, Sommerlad, Dawson & Altman, Tilden, Barker & Knox.

culture of perhaps 25% of the alternative lifestyle participants – in many ways the more visible sector of this culture, and of course, as a fellow communitarian, he had a great interest in commune-style life. He, unlike many others, acknowledges the “rump.”

Over 60 000 Australians are now involved in the alternative lifestyle movement, but only about a quarter of these live in intentional communities...

Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality*, 1995, 39.

In the mid to late 1980s the faltering economy led to higher unemployment (10% nationally) and work had become harder to find and more people were in receipt of welfare benefits. The idea of government supported rural communes was mooted in Australia by the Hawke Government to solve the problems of the stagnation of rural areas and urban youth unemployment.³¹⁸ Metcalf and Vanclay comment that, “In spite of the Prime Minister’s avoidance of the word “kibbutz” in the news conference which he held at that time, “Kibbutz Scheme” was what was presented in the media and the phrase is still current.”³¹⁹ The suggestion was that the government provide assistance to promote rural alternative lifestyles in order to resolve the dual problems of youth unemployment and de-population of rural areas.³²⁰

In fact, the economic basis for intentional communities can be seen as the price of land. Without co-operation many residents on multiple occupancies could not afford to own their own land and homes. The size of the piece of land that an alternative lifestyle participant needs tends to be a lot smaller than the average farm or lifestyle block. Consequently they have an objective need for a form of rural land ownership in which smaller plots are legal. For many the question of communalism or Multiple Occupancy simply reflects an acceptance the dominant pro-community ideology of the alternative culture rather than their real economic needs.

³¹⁸ Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality*, 1995, 39.

³¹⁹ Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 8.

³²⁰ Metcalf, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986, 1.3, 11.

The key economic issue is in fact the plot size: sub-divisibility would work just as well. If the alternative settlers could buy affordable section-sized plots in the bush areas many (but not all) would preferentially do so. They would then require strong town planning controls on common land and other shared resources and facilities. This is what informs the new rural land sharing community regulations that the council is now introducing in which a multiple occupancy block has a proportion of the land for house-sites that can be effectively privately owned by individuals who are part of that incorporation. It seems to me to be a form of land holding for alternative settlers that is destined to succeed. It is more effective than communal holdings because it ensures a way of enforcing territorial rights with respect to their fellow landowners and makes it possible to raise mortgages on that property.

Self-sufficiency

In the early days, many of the politically active alternative lifestyle participants were pushing for exemptions to the Lismore City Council by-laws, and various rural rates.³²¹ In particular, people living on Multiple Occupancy communities like the Tuntable Falls Co-operative argued that they provided much of their own support services and that it was unfair to have to pay for the council to provide (or not to provide) them.

There is ... a consistent demand from people involved in MO for the Council to treat them differently from other forms of development. This is because this form of development may be experimentally aiming to be self-sufficient in food production, and self-supportive in the sense of not requiring external community support.

Barker & Knox, *Findings of a Survey of Attitudes of the Dwellers of Multiple Occupancies*, 1985, 11.

Self-sufficiency has been another long-time ideological companion to the alternative movement, and again there is a gap between ideas and practice. The notion of self-

³²¹ For example compulsory payments to the Pastures Protection Board from all landowners. See "Letters," *Nimbin News*, November 1986–February 1987, 3; and "Landowner Against Pastures Protection Board Charges," *Rainbow News*, March 1988, 31.

sufficiency is one of the disputed themes of the original alternative movement. Nowadays people tend to say that the idea that they should be self-sufficient was imputed to them, rather than generated by them. While documents relating to that time quite clearly show that self-sufficiency *was* one of the original ideas, I think it fair to say that people had different ideas about what self sufficiency was (and is). Certainly, a socially isolated and independent “survivalist” mode does not accord with what most alternative lifestylers’ would consider a good way to live.

[Another] problem facing the question of support of alternative lifestyle participants focuses on the elusive concept of self-sufficiency. ... To therefore suggest that alternative lifestyles have in any way failed because of continuing interactions with the larger society completely misses the point, and presumes a degree of individual isolation which is, in fact, an anathema to most participants.

Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 53-4.

Bill Metcalf points out there has also been a myth that the alternative culture be “open” to everyone, and while he points out the risks that this entails for intentional communities and communes, it has relevance to the wider community as well, as we saw in the **MIGRATION** section.

The naive notion within “Aquarian” circles of twenty years ago that alternative lifestyle groups should have no boundaries, and just be open to all and sundry, has been one of the most insidious, nonsensical mill-stones around the members collective necks.

Metcalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality*, 1995, 189.

The ideological “framing” of Nimbin as a place to grow things can be found in statements that suggest that market gardening and small cropping is something people might migrate to Nimbin to do. In fact, in 1987, studies showed that only 3% of people were dependent on (legal) market gardening type activities.³²² The low level of income

³²² Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 55.

from this kind of land use persists: in 1999 only 10% of all landholders surveyed get their primary income from their land.³²³

Mostly they have considered carefully how they will live when they leave the city and set themselves up on the North coast, and have come prepared with some capital to start a self-employment enterprise such as market gardening, small-crop farming, art or craft work, or whatever. They are in no way opting out of a conventional lifestyle; only opting out of those parts of it that involve traffic jams, stress, lack of physical space, pollution and competition.

Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982, 1982, 141.

Likewise, the popular perception of craftwork as providing an income for people in places like Nimbin is thrown into question by the figure that craft work accounted for only 2% of income before 1987.³²⁴

Anti-materialism

There is the *idea* there should not be extremes of wealth in Nimbin, however a socially agreed levelling mechanism is absent. There is only a moral imperative that people shouldn't be "too materialistic," but there is no effective culturally enacted means of ensuring that wealth equalisation takes place. Unlike many other cultural groups in similar circumstances who have a validated social mechanism for transferring wealth, the Nimbin community relies on normative ideologies enforced within a background of gossip and criticism.

One other thing about Nimbin that strikes me is that Nimbin is [...] not a place to make money. If people come here thinking they're going to make money, it's a mistake. Nimbin is going to finish up teaching you something very different.

Sects, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

³²³ "The Local Beef Industry," *Nimbin News*, February–March 1998, 29.

³²⁴ Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 55. Tourism has changed this and has provided many of the artisans with living wages.

In city terms, few people regularly make a great deal of money, but in the context of Nimbin an amount like five hundred dollars a week is a significant income. Coupled with unease about the impact of tourism development and the drug scene, criticism can come to bear on those who are seen to be making a profit. The important point underlying this is that it opens up the possibility of wide income differentiation within the alternative lifestyle community, and people aren't comfortable with that. A levelling mechanism exists with the abatement rate for benefits – after a certain income is exceeded benefits are reduced.

For example, the Bush Theatre is one of the successful businesses that attract this kind of criticism. It is set up as performance space, but the movie theatre and the associated Mulgum café operate on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, usually attracting a good crowd. One day I overheard a discussion about the Bush Theatre: someone who wanted performance space for a gig was complaining that it was hard to book the venue because it was completely tied up with movies during the weekends. This led onto a discussion about overheads, the cost of hiring the venue, and that the proposed gig would have to guarantee to be economically successful to warrant replacing the movie for that night. The movie business has changed the level of minimum profit requirements, and people were critical of this because profit was seen to be more important than supporting local culture.

Nimbin must be the only place in the world where running a small independent movie theatre and café is not considered making a big enough contribution to the community, because instead of hosting local gigs it is showing movies. In fact, there is plenty of performance space in Nimbin. The Bush Theatre is available on the other four nights a week (admittedly not high-income weekend nights), plus the Community and Rainbow Cafés have space for gigs, and there is the town hall for larger events. The financial success of the movie and meal side of the venture means that the viability of the Bush Theatre is more assured, and people are employed to prepare the food, screen the movies, take tickets, clean and so on.

Autonomy and handouts

Debate has raged over whether or not it was acceptable to allow outside “interference” in the alternative lifestyle in exchange for the financial support of the state, either by the dole or by some kind of rural subsidy. The issue first came up when people moved to the country and applied for the dole while they were building their homes and establishing their gardens and businesses. The issue came up again when the Kibbutz Scheme was being considered.

[T]he suggestion that government assistance might be provided to encourage or promote alternative lifestyles has been the subject of spirited debate within the alternative lifestyle movement. While some participants see government assistance as a highly desirable form of aid, long overdue, others see in it a degree of governmental interference which will destroy their very reason for being, and which will make them even more vulnerable to the forms of hierarchical interference and dominance that they have assiduously sought to avoid.

Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 8-9.

[Rob Allen] says the dole also destroyed the alternative lifestyle dream. “It took away the incentive for people to be self-sufficient or develop cottage industries,” he said.

“Pursuing a dream,” *Northern Star*, 11 June 1998, 8.

There has always been debate in the wider alternative lifestyle movement over self-sufficiency and welfare dependency.³²⁵ Surprisingly, perhaps, the issue of subsidies is a profoundly ideological one: you might think that money from the state either is or isn't a subsidy. However, the definition of what comprises a subsidy is strongly debated.³²⁶ This

³²⁵ Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 59-60.

³²⁶ I use a straight-forward dictionary definition of the word “subsidy,” to be “Money contributed by State or public body to keep down price of commodities etc. (food, housing, subsidy) or to expenses of commercial undertaking, charitable institution, etc., held to be of public utility.” (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1978, 1150.)

echoes the debate over other subsidies like unemployment benefits and it needs to be examined as an expression of the alternative ideology. As Volosinov points out, reality is determined within each cultural milieu.

Each field of ideological creativity has its own kind of orientation toward reality and each refracts reality in its own way.

Volosinov, *Marxism and The Philosophy of Language*, 1973, 10-11.

I see these realities as refractions of the political economy of the culture. In researching the Rainbow Power Company, I encountered considerable (passive) resistance to the idea that it is supported by the state.³²⁷ I was trying to find out to what extent the core-periphery forces of capitalism were in action with regard to the Rainbow Power Company. In particular, I was looking at the flow of money from the city to the country, and trying to make a link to other subsidies received by industries that have migrated from core urban areas to set up business in rural areas. In doing so I lumped together what I broadly see as subsidies – for example: sales rebates, grants, benefits, favourable pricing structures, tariffs and the like. I asked the question, “Can you give me some idea of how much money RPC gets from commercial grants and state/government development subsidies?”

[Rainbow Power answer:] Nothing at the moment. Several years ago our export subsidiary company RESHAPE Pty Ltd got a marketing grant and a few years ago we did get some money to increase our grid inter-active system and to promote the industry generally. ... We have never received any “research grants.”

Dave Lambert, Personal Communication, 23 April 1999.

Following this up (as it was inconsistent with my understanding of the situation) I pointed to the state funding that Peter Pedals acquired to set up the renewable energy-source household technology module, and suggested that these comprised some kind of a subsidy.³²⁸

³²⁷ See RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT WORK: Rainbow Power Company – Case Study, page 303.

³²⁸ “Kali on Alternative Energy,” *Nimbin News*, August–September 1998, 6-7.

[Rainbow Power answer:] The demonstration project was federal funding which went to **another** company called Energy from Nature Home P/L who set up the demo at our premises.

Dave Lambert, Personal Communication, 14 May 1999. [Emphasis mine.]

This reply fails to acknowledge that this “other” company, the one that set up the demonstration on their premises, is actually a *subsidiary* of Rainbow Power. I should point out that Dave Lambert’s answer is strictly correct. This ellipsis is extremely interesting and uncovered an ideological dimension that I was not looking for at the time. This is a clear example of strategic responses given by alternative lifestyle participants when they are protecting their interests.

Eventually I wrote directly to the funding agency SEDA and requested the information from them, asking about grants and contracts to Rainbow Power and all its subsidiaries. SEDA is a government organisation their financial information is in the public domain.³²⁹ The amount of subsidy money was *far* less than I had been led to expect. The Rainbow Power workers do not perceive the company as being subsidised because that implies unearned income, and therefore a degree of dependency and outside control over their work. This produces a perceptual resistance to recognising what elements of subsidy are actually present in Rainbow Power’s income. This example illustrates the materialist thesis that people’s ideologies affect their perception, whereas in an empiricist epistemology people’s perceptions are independent and their prejudices are formed only afterwards in the shape of theory. It also shows that there can be a significant gap between an important ideology and its instantiation, its on-the-ground material practice.

Reciprocity and co-operation

Reciprocity and co-operation are traits commonly practiced among the urban poor, migrants and among rural dwellers. Similarities also exist with the process by which the pioneer migrants arrive and help the other people move there. They are very much the

³²⁹ SEDA is the acronym for the NSW Sustainable Energy Development Authority.

same kinds of personal services because the people who don't have the chance to use the cash economy because they're not yet integrated with the economy of the place where they arrive.

We knew that a group unity was our only strength in these early days, lacking skill, acceptance from local authorities, with hard physical conditions and only a hazy dream before us - freedom, growth and self-sufficiency on this piece of land that as yet we didn't even own. (Amanda Gittus.)

Davis & Caldwell (Editors), *Living Together: Family Patterns and Lifestyles*, 1980, 132.

The fact that reciprocity is an ordinary part of the economic existence of benefit peasants actually impels them towards a communal lifestyle. They see the relations that exist between members of a community (which are essentially those of mutual aid) as being natural and normal.

In December 1998 a friend of mine visiting from New Zealand was hitch-hiking 30km to Murwillumbah to connect with the Brisbane service and he reported a vehicle stopping to explain why they *weren't* offering him a lift. He had left Nimbin wondering *if* he'd get a lift from anyone. It is in a myriad of ways and customs such as this the alternative ideology can be seen to inform co-operative activities.

The level of vehicle ownership is low, with around 13% of rural dwellers in Nimbin and 24.4% of the population in Nimbin having no car. This is coupled with a lack of public transport. The social disadvantage that this might cause is ameliorated by a community network that permits more co-operation - such as car sharing, collecting items from town for other people and the cultural expectation that alternative lifestyle persons will give hitch-hikers rides.

This pro-reciprocal ideology is embodied in alternative culture and there are many social rewards for generosity. The ritual of reciprocation takes place to a higher degree (or a more conscious degree) among alternatives, which is why activities like green dollars schemes (LETS) have a high likelihood of success. They keep skills and cash in the local economy, and perhaps they can also be seen as having an income-smoothing function

because they limit the cash-income of local businesses and encourage them to buy locally.

The advantage of green dollars schemes is that they don't attract tax, credit or debit interest (nor the attention of social welfare). Green dollars schemes allow some people to benefit from their skills without having to be formally in business, and the wide skills base in Nimbin is another advantage. Advances in communication technology, computing and in accounting software have made these schemes much more viable than in the past.

11.2 United by cultural practice into a movement

Even after nearly a decade of settlement, the benefit peasantry had not reached consensus on who comprised the "alternative" community, and nor did they consider themselves as constituting an alternative lifestyle *movement*. For a survey on land use patterns done by the University of New England in the late 1970s,

{S}eventy-five Nimbin new settlers were interviewed on their reasons for coming to the town. Asked whether they felt themselves to be part of a movement, the vast majority replied emphatically they did not.

Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982, 1982, 126.

The above quote provides an example of the gap between people's subjective analysis and the material ideologies that underlie their cultural practices. Despite their contrary self-reporting, the alternative lifestyle group exists as a social movement (of some kind) without any shadow of doubt. This collective self-denial came from the opportunity the question provided for respondents to put forward the position that while there is a movement, they, as *individuals*, were not members. This is consistent with a alternative cultural priority – that each individual is a free and autonomous being.

As a group, the alternative lifestyle participants didn't want to be "tagged and bagged," but instead to have their differences acknowledged and validated. The notion that "we are all individuals" is frequently expressed. After all, that was why many of them left their city lives in the first place – to escape the cog-in-a-wheel, faceless bureaucracy

lifestyle, in order to “find themselves” as individuals. The objections to the mooted “Australia Card” included the claim that it was “Orwellian,” and again pointed to autonomy and freedom as one of the set of core values.³³⁰ However, the resistance to these kinds of smart cards have a clear economic basis as they are designed to make benefits harder to get and to keep.

11.2.1 A materialist versus semantic analysis

I look at the *material* core of the ideology rather than the *semantic* core of the ideology. The core of an ideology is typically seen as the central ideas shared by everybody who “holds” the ideology, despite the existence of peripheral ideas on which people might differ. The core ideas are essential to the ideology, and the ones, which are peripheral, could be dropped without changing its essential nature. I’m looking at ideology from the point of view of the core of the ideology being connected with the basic practices and material products that make up the ideology.

Returning to the example of Catholic ideology – the organisation of the Catholic church, the attendance of persons at churches, the liturgical practices of persons who go to church and the social circumstances in which church rituals are used to mark life events like baptism, marriage, funerals, the taxation of the faithful to support the priestly superstructure – those are the core elements of the church, not the particular theological ideas that the Catholic church actually has. In those ways they don’t differ that much (in the core mechanisms) from an Islamic church where similar (material) practices take place. I would also look at the articulation of church activities with the ruling activities of local dominant classes.

The following story of Spaceman Bob confirms that an idea (in this case, that the aliens are coming) is less important than the ritual practice of gathering together people and uniting them into a group through a shared experience and common objectives. Although the aliens failed to keep their appointment, the ritual material practices of

³³⁰ “Orwellian Smart Cards,” *Nimbin News*, February–March 1998, 16.

travelling together, fire-making, singing and dancing, fasting and cleansing and so on led to the recognition that “seventy people had bothered to go that far to try to do something to make a better world,” and gave the event meaning as a material practice.

There’s been lots and lots and lots of wonderful crazies come to this area over the time, with incredible vision. And the first one I remember who was really a classic character was Spaceman Bob. Spaceman Bob believed that he’d been talked to by the spirits out there, and they’d told him a particular point on the map that they were coming to on the 6th of August 1972, and anybody gathered at that spot was going to be taken away into space and taught what they needed to know to bring the world together, and then they’d be brought back to carry on the role.

And so this guy arrived, and there was a lot of us around there, and we might have been sort of naïve but it was an interesting story, and so it was all set up so that anyone that wanted to go had to fast first, and cleanse themselves and turn up at this particular point and then we’d all go and meet the space-people.

Amazingly about seventy people turned up and we formed this incredible convoy off to save the planet, and into the dead of night we drove [for] about 120 miles ... I was actually in the lead car where this guy, Spaceman Bob was sitting with his legs crossed and his eyes closed, and going, “We’re getting close, we’re getting close.” So we’re driving along in this sort of deserted road out in the middle of no-where, he said, “Stop, stop. This is it, this is it.” We got out of the trucks and the cars and old bombs ... and we walked into the paddock and there was this huge stack of firewood that took one match to light. It was the 6th of August so it was very very cold, and there was this tremendous fire ... and we all stood around waiting for the spaceships to come. And we waited and we waited and we sang, and we were waiting. And nothing happened.

And then Spaceman Bob came up with ... “Well, gee, I think I might have been deluded.” But there was this incredible sense that it really didn’t matter if he was deluded because seventy people had bothered to go that far to try to do something to make a better world.

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

Starting from a “structural” analysis of ideology we can proceed to a “functional” analysis of how these core practices unite the adherents of the ideology.

An ideology can function on several levels, tying together disparate threads of thought, and can have something for everyone. It rests on a shared understanding, a recognition of what is meant, even if it’s not shared in the sense of being the same thing for

everyone. A shared ideology may contain different levels of “truth” for different practitioners.

The alternative lifestyle participants agree on the core values of their ideology, and have a meaningful set of central principles and behavioural codes that are agreed on by virtually everybody. There are broad principles in common, and in this way the alternative ideology unifies the movement.

For example, Altman writing in an AASC (Australian Association of Sustainable Communities) newsletter identified the following core values: –

- An emphasis on self-sufficiency
- a blurring of boundaries between economic and other spheres of life;
- an emphasis on living simply, valuing the quality of human experience above material well-being;
- a preference for non-hierarchical, co-operative and flexible working arrangements;
- conservation of non-renewable resources and an emphasis on recycling materials and using renewable energy; and
- an emphasis on low-impact, small-scale technologies.³³¹

Yet when you look closely at the alternative movement it’s possible to see a bewildering variety of ideas and it is impossible to find ideas on which they all agree in the *same kind* of way. This sounds like a contradiction: how can they agree on core values yet not agree in the same kind of a way? Different things are sometimes meant by ideas that are called by the same name, and people might enact their belief in different ways. For example, the original 1970s settlers have a different concept of what an “alternative

³³¹ Altman, J. “Rural Communes – A Good Thing?” News From Home, AASC Bioregional Newsletter, 2(4), 1985, 7-9. Cited by Tilden, *Women in Intentional Communities*, 1991, 21. From this list I think natural time versus external time, tolerance and compassion and cultural diversity could be inferred.

lifestyle” or “self-sufficiency” comprises than do later migrants to the area. This complexity can give rise to the idea that there is no commonly held alternative ideology.

The demographic features of alternative lifestyle participants are diverse and complex, and can only be grasped with an appreciation of the ideological diversity that also exists within the movement.

Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 4. [Emphasis mine.]

As an example, the alternative lifestyle movement has a philosophy of environmental preservation. However, their attitudes to the exploitation of the natural environment by capitalism are linked to a wider range of practices and beliefs. Saving the rainforest is an example of an ideology that plays a unifying role. The pro-rainforest ideology embraces more than just the eco-activists, and extends far beyond the people who actually protest against rainforest plunder, and accommodates many different ideas of what rainforest conservation is, and why the rainforest should be preserved.

Some think that the rainforest should be preserved simply because trees are beautiful, others got involved in the fight for the rainforest because they had crops on the boundaries of or within State forests, others because corrupt financial and political intrigues offended them. Some people were stimulated to a political position because they were morally outraged at the treatment of protestors and already had an anti-establishment outlook and saw the police action as evidence of suppression of the movement by the state. For some people rainforest protection is part of their life-ways, as part of their organic “oneness” with mother earth, and for radical greenies, saving the rainforest might be their entire *raison d'être*. Some people see “sustainable” logging as a sensible option, and others are fighting for the rainforest to be left in a pristine state. For others the rainforest represents income from tourists, or for attracting rich settlers to purchase land nearby because rainforest is fashionable at the moment. For others, it is an investment in the overall ecological sustainability of their lifestyle – and saving the rainforest will save them money in the long run through maintaining a suitable climate. Others see rainforest preservation as an urgent and essential activity, necessary to enable the human races’ continued existence on the planet, and that without such action an environmental cataclysm looms.

However all these people share the unifying ideology of “rainforest is good and must be protected.” It is thus possible for the same practice to have a very different role in the minds of individuals. Therefore those ideologies can play a different and complementary role in an organised and differentiated social practice.

11.2.2 A range of views: diversity not differentiation

The alternative ideology ranges from quite scientific views about the dangers of nuclear power through to the notion that there are so many people on the planet that the continents are shifting underneath them. Sometimes these ideas are expressed by the same person. The alternative movement must maintain this broadness of spectrum in that the alternative cultural milieu has to span a range of scientificity and sophistication (from the simple to the complex) that ideologies within the rest of the urban matrix simply don’t. In mainstream urban life the discourse of scientific argument is relatively distinct from the discourse of popular common-sense argumentation.

Within the alternative culture, ideologies that are maintained as relatively distinct discourses in the mainstream urban culture are brought into close contact in the rural alternative core. Nimbin (and the Rainbow Region generally) represents a social environment in which ideologies mix more freely than they do in the city because persons recruited from different urban milieu find themselves within the same cultural space when they get there.

Hence the ideology that unites them *has to* (not just does) cover a broader range and articulate with a wider variety of positions – including scientific and popular positions – than it would have to do in urban milieu, where it can simply differentiate and have a scientific version, and a popular version, which can be distinct from each other. This is quite clear in cases such as the opposition to genetic modification where there is a scientific critique of genetic modification and there is a popular critique. The scientific one focuses the moral, social, medical and ecological consequences genetic engineering, whereas the popular one relies on more iconic messages such as, “don’t fuck with mother nature” and “frankenfood.” In Nimbin, both these discourses are united into a single movement.

Diversity in absence of material conflict

The alternative lifestyle participants have a very similar class position, and it is their common class position that effectively unites them. That means that the differing views that they have on particular ideologies don't tend to lead to rupture. There is no tendency for ideological diversity to result in the furious contention of opposing schools of thought because they share (more or less) a common position in the class struggle. Many of their ideologies are *ritual* practices and beliefs, rather than practices and beliefs informed by economic interests and activities.

It seems to me that this unity in diversity is possible only in the *absence* of material conflicts. Diversity is celebrated when people meet on equal footing: however if a conflict of material interests is perceived then corporate self-consciousness (for example, a shared ethnicity or class position) is elicited.

If you look at, let's say, Chinese and Western oriented astrologers as branches of astrology, although their ideologies are very diverse, there is no tendency for the conflict between the theories that underlie those astrological practices to produce a conflict or schism within the Nimbin practitioners of these arts.³³² There is no incentive for people who want Chinese horoscopes to fall out with and struggle against those who believe in the western European horoscope tradition, even though they produce wildly different predicted outcomes. The economic point of that struggle isn't there. Instead they get along quite well by affirming that "there's something to be said for both, perhaps eventually we can work out a united astrology in which the insights of both traditions will be incorporated." This kind of attitude is far more likely to occur when there is an ideological or ritual difference rather than a difference in economic interests. Also, the alternative lifestyle is culturally acquisitive, and integrates (more or less successfully) elements of other cultures into its general practice. The alternative culture contains many contradictory ideas, not uncommonly enacted by the same person. We saw this with the alternative views on over-population and their own high birth rate.

³³² A comparison valid in Nimbin, although not on a world scale.

Without serious material conflicts a diversified ideology can arise and be maintained. In so far as there are differences in the ideology (about the details of whether astrology affects us according to the Chinese schema or in the European astrological tradition, for example) those are not relevant until they are taken up by persons who have different material practices and interests. At that point what appear to be trivial doctrinal differences can become basic because they come to express conflicting interests. This is clear where there *are* vested material interests, for instance with medicine where doctors and alternative healers are effectively competitors for the health dollar.

Where they do have economic force, alternative ideologies have resulted in a direct expression of their interests as a class. Their mobilisations over the rainforest, over cannabis legalisation, and housing and zoning regulation are all examples of their class agency.³³³

³³³ This will be picked up again in the chapter CLASS FOR ITSELF, page 419.

Chapter 12. Productive Core of the Hippie Nation

12.0 Introduction

In this chapter I suggest that we should think of the Australia-wide alternative lifestyle movement as a branch of alternative ideological production with Nimbin as its economic and ideological core. Nimbin is more than a symbolic form of the centre of an alternative core-periphery: it is an industry producing alternative practices, language, and artefacts.

The chapter begins with a look at the media. An independent media is one of the major outputs of the alternative lifestyle, at one and the same time it produces alternative culture and disseminates it.³³⁴ I discuss filmmaking, the arts, festivals, language and expressions of ethnic identity embodied in language, clothing styles, food, and architecture.

12.1 A specialist ideological industry

The alternative lifestyle participants are part of a specialist ideological industry. If you look at that industry in its geographical distribution, Nimbin represents a focal point, a concentration, and hence the core-periphery processes that happen within that industry apply fully to Nimbin. They constitute a significant and to some extent distinct branch of the ideological division of labour. The processes by which the core within a symbolic ideological industry acquires a concentrated and mutually reinforcing set of specialist centres can be clearly seen in relation to Nimbin. As Graeme Dunstan notes,

The concept of “critical cultural mass” is important here. How do ideas about how we ought to live, the dream wished of some and the eccentric practices of others become a normative cultural practice?

³³⁴ See also *TOURISM: Artisans*, page 280.

Once the “cultural critical mass” is achieved, the new values take root in community cultural practice and **take on a life of their own**, evolving as new insights and fashions arise and as new knowledge and teaching expertise accumulates from the practice.

Dunstan, *Images From the Edge*, Position Paper, 1994, 3.

Aquarius is a symbol of something far greater than the event, it is a symbol of a generation empowered to follow their heart and instigate change, it was the spirit of the time which gave birth not only to the Aquarius festival, but to the peace and environment movement, the struggle for social justice, the courage to embrace philosophies of other cultures and religions, the organic movement, permaculture, alternative medicine and an explosion of creative expression through the arts and music. [Robyn Francis.]

Nimbin News. June–July 1998, 5.

The Aquarius Festival itself has acquired a symbolic weight far beyond its beginning as a festival and has become an icon of the alternative lifestyle movement in Australia. Nimbin’s position at the core of this ideological production process can be seen in terms of voting patterns, a critical mass in terms of numbers of artists, actors, dancers, musicians, writers and activists, and the position of Nimbin and the Aquarius Festival as international icons of things and ideas alternative.

12.2 Relationship with mainstream media

There is a long history of the news media being a vehicle for opposition to the alternative lifestyle. In 1979 it took the form of the alternative migrants being publicly blamed in the *Northern Star* by the health inspector for diseases of poverty and overcrowding. He claimed there was a rise in the number of people with hepatitis, venereal and other communicable diseases, there was a diphtheria scare, and there were wild allegations of high child mortality. These claims were used to justify the crackdown by health authorities and building inspectors on the alternative lifestyle dwellings. All of this fomented community disharmony and intensified the boundaries between straight and alternative.

Mr. Frost [the Richmond Shire Health Surveyor] said that the building of such shacks was complete waste of good second-hand building materials and fittings. He

said that the shacks exposed the occupants and their children to serious illnesses, chronic disabilities, gastric and respiratory diseases, stress and communicable diseases and resultant high infant mortality rates and reduced enjoyment of life. [*Northern Star*, 20 July 1979.]

Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 49.

A reply from the Homebuilder's Association to Mr K. Frost's allegations in the straight media, the *Northern Star* was published in the alternative newspaper, the *Nimbin News*. Unlike other newly arrived "minority" groups, the alternative lifestyle participants not only stood up for themselves, but they took the opposition to pieces in exchanges like this. Their debating skills, honed in the city, tended to be sharper than the local council representatives, and control of their own media gave their concerns the focus they wanted.

Mr. Frost's concern with "serious illnesses, chronic disabilities, gastric and respiratory diseases, stress and communicable diseases and rodents, vermin, insects, damp, cold and unsanitary water and toilet facilities" no doubt is shared by all hamlet occupants and suburban dwellers alike but to imply that the hamlet occupants have a "resultant high infant mortality rate and reduced enjoyment of life" is unsubstantiated nonsense. (Just look at those suntanned healthy kids and happy people at any resettler gathering.) Mr. Frost is mistaken in his preposterous statement that "building applications are required to ensure that people properly plan what maybe the costliest item in their life to ensure satisfaction with the result." Building applications need not be properly planned, houses need not at all be costly and satisfaction with the result is purely a subjective emotion. It seems to be that there has been a lot of unnecessary hippy bashing in Mr. Frost's article, based I think on mis-information or lack of information and understanding. [*Nimbin News*, No. 78, 1979.]

Quoted by Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 49.

Even now the mainstream is seldom fair to the achievements of the alternative lifestyle participants – minimising the positives, highlighting the downsides, and generally marginalising their aims and aspirations. The following quotes point to the strong influence the media has on peoples' perceptions of Nimbin, and the tendency to sensationalise or trivialise.

I've been asked [by the media] "Well, what is this thing called Nimbin?" And I'd say, oh well, it's full of spirit and colour and charm, and wonderful and amazing and terrible things happen in the main street right where everyone can see them, and families get together and people make love and split up and try and kill each other—all on the same day and it's just the most amazing place to be. It's a microcosm of the broader world.

And then the paper would come out the next weekend, "You can do your own thing at Nimbin," and of course within a year the disenchanting, disenfranchised, unemployed, directionless youth in Woollongong would think, "Well, you can do your own thing in Nimbin, let's go there and do that," and what they brought to the picture was a very different sort of a thing, so there was this constant undercurrent of negative energy being drawn to the town because of the distortion of the positive message that was put out to the media. They couldn't really compute, Nimbin is a place where absolutely wonderful interactions between human beings just might be possible for once on this planet—they couldn't compute that. And it came out as, "You can do your own thing at Nimbin." So now we have people shooting up smack in the street. [Jennie Dell]

Sects, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

A number of hostile, inaccurate and irresponsible reports on Nimbin have caused considerable harm and aroused the anger of the people who live there. The common media-promulgated perception of Nimbin as the place to "score" drugs, and of the alternative community as a whole as lazy, druggy dole bludgers has always been a problem for the people who live in Nimbin.³³⁵

It is too easy to fix on one pathology (the drug dealing in the main street occupies maybe 25 people maximum of a population of 6000 served directly by the village) and miss the bigger picture. Most media crews come stuck in a groove.

Dunstan, *Images From the Edge*, Position Paper, 1994, 4.

³³⁵ For a thorough-going analysis of one drummed up "media event" see the ironically titled, *Nimbin Drugs Shock Horror - The Full Story*. This web-site was an analysis of a series of stories published in the *Northern Star*. Rhonda Ellis, a media student at Southern Cross University, wrote a swingeing critique of the *Northern Star*, and the failure of the paper to follow the code of media ethics in terms of fairness and accuracy.

It is obvious that mischief-makers, in the absence of data to support their claims and in search of a good (newspaper-selling) story, will distort the message, or make something up, or tell a story which is the “truth” but not the whole story. For example, during a fieldwork trip May and June of 1998 in a series of articles entitled, “Nimbin: The Great Debate” was published in the mainstream Lismore paper, the *Northern Star*. The *Northern Star* editor unselfconsciously boasted of the newspaper’s greater insight, promising not to do a “hit-and-run” exercise typical of the “rest” of the media coverage of the town.³³⁶

There is a lot more to Nimbin than meets the eye. But it’s what meets the eye that gives Nimbin a reputation it doesn’t want – as a mecca for drugs. It’s this image that makes Nimbin easy prey for national media hungry for a quick fix of colourful, juicy and mostly negative stories.

“Editorial,” *Northern Star*, 6 June 1998, 14.

The paper then published the series of articles, every one of which contained reference to Nimbin as a place to score drugs. Over 33% of the column inches were devoted to dealing with the Nimbin “drug problem.” While one issue dealt *solely* with drugs in Nimbin, every other article contained references to drugs as well. And this, despite the editor’s promise not to do a “hit-and-run.” The good things about Nimbin, the achievements of the people who live there and the things they are really proud of, were together assigned a half page.³³⁷ Each of these accomplishments could have warranted a page each. In other words the *Northern Star* coverage of Nimbin continued to concentrate on a minority of persons to the exclusion of the vast majority of alternative lifestyle participants. The following story was reported in the *Northern Star* series.

³³⁶ *Northern Star*, 6 June 1998, Front-page.

³³⁷ “Good Vibes,” *Northern Star*, 12 June 1998, 8.

A woman arrives crying and says she has just been in a fight with a woman over money. She says she reported it to the police, but now she can't find any witnesses willing to confirm her story. The other junkies calm her down and she leaves.

"It's business as usual," *Northern Star*, 8 June 1998, 7.

I was also a witness to this "story" and was with some of the people who talked to her on the way to the police station and "calmed her down" when she got back. While it was a true story there is an assumption that these things are ordinary events rather than less usual ones. This shows how the media can project an image of "drug hell-hole" from one event. I find the phrase, "the other *junkies* calm her down," to be offensive (because it is untruthful, sensationalist and judgemental), but the phrase, "other *people* calm her down" is not such a powerful image.

In 1995 a *60 Minutes* documentary raised the issue of benefit entitlement for unemployed "ferals," who are usually young persons who live at environmental blockades. This led to another round of beneficiary bashing, including one person phoning the Department of Social Security to suggest that the ferals be shot like feral pigs and cats.

A *Northern Star* headline, "Dole boss denies Nimbin targeted," again shows the paper's unhelpful editorial policy. The headline implies that someone had accused CentreLink of targeting Nimbin's beneficiaries, where in fact there no such suggestion was made in the body of the article. The regional manager for Social Security had taken an entirely reasonable position, saying that, "while clients had to comply with department regulations, it was not the department's place to dictate to people how they lived." This accords with what defenders of beneficiaries in Nimbin have always said, that people are entitled to a benefit wherever in Australia they reside.³³⁸

Prejudiced and prejudicial views of Nimbin are always challenged by alternatives, both in the mainstream media and in local independent media. In the programme, *Couchman*

³³⁸ "Dole boss denies Nimbin targeted," *Northern Star*, 26 May 1995.

Over Australia, “host” Peter Couchman was criticised by many in the audience for missing the point and for applying a stereotype of hippies “dropping out.” During the public meeting filmed for the programme, one woman stood up out of the audience and pointed out:

“[You] have failed to discuss the fact that the alternative lifestyle has allowed a lot of people to live on incredibly low incomes with security of home—to build their own homes and have security of tenure.”

Couchman Over Australia, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1991

Another national television host, Don Burke, who hosts *Burke’s Backyard*, used similar stereotypes in a programme about Nimbin filmed and screened in 1993. He focused on ferals, cannabis use and appearance, and typecast the community as “drop-out hippies.” Nimbin people are staunch defenders of their culture and stand up against mainstream prejudices, and Burke was asked to apologise for his portrayal of Nimbin people.³³⁹

12.3 Independent media

As a group, the alternative lifestyle activists tended not to “play by the rules,” subverting and inverting many of the norms of social and political discourse. This meant that they out-manoeuvred the straights when it came to running a campaign and were magnificent exploiters of the “10-second sound bite” television coverage and they are also renowned for manufacturing newsworthy political actions.³⁴⁰

³³⁹ “TV show host ‘got it wrong on Nimbin’,” *Northern Star*, 20 May 1993.

³⁴⁰ These skills remain part of the alternative lifestyle participants political “tool kit” and reflect their strong understanding of the role of the media (and their educated class background.) See the Peacebus action, in *CLASS FOR ITSELF: Penal Reform*, page 443.

We brought with us an iconoclastic disregard for the standard political hypocrisy and cant ... and an incorrigible sense of play with which we re-wrote the political operating manuals. [Bob Hopkins.]

Some Children of the Dream Website.³⁴¹

A high level of media literacy – the purposeful use of the media to get across a particular point of view – typifies the counter-cultural protest. Peace campaigner Helen Caldicott tells a story about a clause within the Liberal party manifesto that condoned the use of nuclear power and uranium enrichment plants for Australia. After failing in her attempt to alert a disinterested media, she took out two half-page advertisements, one in the *Melbourne Age* and one in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. She writes,

I designed the ad, using a beguiling photograph of Micky [her grandson] dressed in his striped pyjamas. The caption read, “Does this child have a safe future?” The ads, plus a small TV commercial, set me back \$30,000, but then how much is a safe future worth?

The story was not carried by the media. However, on 4 January 1994 the Liberal Party policy committee publicly and officially revoked its nuclear policy, saying it was clearly not acceptable to the Australian public. Obviously many of its followers had seen the ads and internal pressure had been exerted to change the nuclear agenda. Yet again it was proven that small, well-planned actions can profoundly affect the political agenda.

Helen Caldicott, *A Passionate Life*, 1996, 392.

Making it personal – the personal is political – informs many of their campaigns. The Compassion Club, an organisation set up to distribute medical-quality cannabis to patients, uses the same technique: asking is it fair to deny a dying woman a drug that will give her relief.³⁴²

The battle against the gold mining venture at Timbarra was fought both on the ground and in the media. Activists videotaped the destruction of habitat and the desecration of sacred Aboriginal sites. After the first images were broadcast on television, things turned

³⁴¹ <http://www.nimbin.net/dream/photo29.htm>

³⁴² See CLASS FOR ITSELF: Cannabis legalisation, page 439.

ugly for the activists. Rusty Harris, Hawk and video camera operator Peter Pumpkin returned to the mine, and Rusty and Hawk were attacked and badly hurt at the remote site.

This attack turned the tide on the miners. The TV news, the front page photos and the home videos with the raw facts from the front demonstrated that this was the place to be if one wanted to defend the Earth. From this point on resistance at the perimeter grew and grew.

Graeme Dunstan, *Timbarra and Making the Earth a Garden*. 1999, 3-4.³⁴³

Media production represents both an ideological product and forceful political activity. Using independent news media alternative lifestyle participants can get their (ideological) “product” to the world. Filmmakers and writers and performance artists (and locally owned theatre and art space) give voice to the alternative movement, its interests and aspirations. The Bush Traks recording studio and multimedia centre also has a major role in an independent media.³⁴⁴ The alternative media give voice to “the ordinary person,” and telling their stories is one of the ways they do this. Sculpture, art, dance, and theatre also act as vehicles for alternative ideologies and practices. The struggle for autonomy and self-expression can be seen in these endeavours.

Market-days, fairs and festivals are other examples of this. The Visions of Nimbin Expo was consciously conceived to be a counter-balance to the sensation-seeking “sound-bites” generated by the Mardi Grass festival that were seen to be reinforcing stereotyped views of Nimbin. It was believed that media distortion contributed to Mardi Grass becoming seen as a drug festival rather than a drug law *reform* event as first envisioned.

As I said in the discussion of tourism, the media strongly conditions the perceptions and expectations that visitors bring to Nimbin. This, in turn, impacts on the way the economy and culture of the area grows or fails to grow. It also impacts on how the people who live in Nimbin accept, resist, modify and subvert the influences that come to

³⁴³ <http://www.nrg.com.au/~graeme/timbarra.htm>

³⁴⁴ See PRODUCTIVE CORE FOR THE HIPPIE NATION: Bush Traks multimedia centre, page 369.

bear on their way of life by highlighting some aspects of their life as more important than others. For example, the media pays more attention to the issue of drugs and neglects the many wonderful and positive things that happen in Nimbin.

[M]uch media attention is diverted by the seedier sides of Nimbin's reputation, or in seeking to portray us as quaint throwbacks to a bygone era.

Nimbin and Environs, No 2, 1993, 4.

The Nimbin Museum is a unique expression of alternative culture. It opened in 1992 and is full of memorabilia and ephemera from the Nimbin alternative settlement and before. Andrew Norris, a visitor from England wrote that, "The museum is a junk shop full of meaningless exhibits which lose a lot in interpretation."³⁴⁵ A warning at the very least, not to expect the normal behind-glass displays of traditional museums. Photographs of the exhibits have been used to illustrate this thesis.

The world wide web is proving to be a major boon for alternative expression. The creator has complete editorial control over their message, which can be cheaply disseminated both locally and internationally.³⁴⁶ The core of what was to become the internet was designed by the US Department of Defense during the height of the Cold War. It is a communications system that is designed to survive a nuclear war and its decentralised structure means that no one part of the network is absolutely essential. There is no one vulnerable "high command" that can be knocked out. If one part of the network is damaged, neighbouring parts automatically work around the damaged part. Its decentralised structure means that the internet is extremely resistant to censorship. This makes the internet a valuable tool for political groups because it means their message is much harder to suppress.

The establishment of the Nimbin Network Association has provided a platform and an access point for on-line experimentation and exploration, and together with two

³⁴⁵ <http://svr.ssci.liv.ac.uk/~norris/australia/east2.html>

³⁴⁶ These issues are also discussed in *RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT WORK: Computer-based Work*, page 321 and *CLASS FOR ITSELF: Technology*, page 471.

local newspapers, a news magazine, the community calendar and two aspirant FM radio stations, the legitimate and necessary availability of information to local residents providing knowledge and thus personal empowerment stands our community in good stead for 1999. [Bob Hopkins.]

“On to the Millenium,” *Nimbin News*, December 1998-January 1999, 33.

Nimbin Independent Radio is another example of autonomy and local-ownership and is the result of many years of work to get “on the airwaves.” Ironically, one of the big problems in getting to air was finding a place to site the transmitter because of the widespread mistrust among Nimbin resistance of microwave radiation and its effects on health.

Publications

The ability to create and disseminate culture is an important aspect of the alternative lifestyle. The *Nimbin News* is a long-standing example of this, building on the tradition of a daily broadsheet called *The Nimbin Good Times* established during the 1973 Aquarius Festival.³⁴⁷ First issued in 1976, *Nimbin News* was a weekly paper, running to 36 duplicated pages on occasion. It was, and remains, a means of expression for the alternative community, an information bulletin and a networking tool, and was put together by local volunteers.³⁴⁸

In 1986 the importance of the *Nimbin News* as a vehicle for local interests was brought home to the alternative community when they temporarily lost control of the paper to an “amiable con man” who had registered the names of *Nimbin News* and *Rainbow Times*. The community paper came to print under the banner *Rainbow News* for a time. An editorial written at the time puts these points very clearly:

³⁴⁷ *Nimbin & Environs*, No. 3, 1996, 24.

³⁴⁸ This date came from *Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982*, 1982, 123. Another source gives 1978 as the date that *Nimbin News* was first produced. *Nimbin & Environs*, No. 3, 1996, 24.

Nimbin News belongs to the Nimbin Community. It is an access press and has been brought out by many different groups and individuals over the years. We, as the work group, are the present custodians of their community newspaper. What Graham [Jones] has done is plunder the name into his own hands – legally. And with Govmnt money he can print *Nimbin News* & *Rainbow Times* & enjoy all the benefits of the good name & the ten years of work put into this entity. He can also order the present group to stop using the name *Nimbin News* and *Rainbow Times*.

Rainbow News, November 1986–February 1987, 2. [Abbreviation in original.]

Note the use of a composite name, *Rainbow News*, using the unused iconic parts of *Rainbow Times* and *Nimbin News*. The editorial called for a boycott of the paper produced by Graham Jones and the public naming of him as an unscrupulous money-grubber would have made life in such a small community rather uncomfortable. Eventually the paper got its name back.

The *Aquarian Age* is a free Nimbin newspaper established more recently (in late 1998) which distributes 6000 copies per issue. The *Aquarian Age* has acquired a reputation as the mouthpiece for the group who opposed the Community Centre. The *Aquarian Age* and the Community Centre publications were in competition for the advertising dollar of Nimbin.

Self-publication was one of the methods used in the fight against the nearby Ocean Shores development. An activist called Fast Buck\$ rose to prominence during the fight against the Bond Corporation development proposed for Ocean Shores (cleverly renamed Open Sores) during the early 1980s. The Fast Buck\$ story exemplifies how a high intelligence, humorous, low-budget campaign can really hurt the bourgeoisie.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁹ This was the period in Australian politics that led up to the Fitzgerald Inquiry into police corruption. Not only were many of the police corrupt, many politicians were implicated in big-time financial rip-offs, and the tax-payer was the loser every time. For a full discussion on this see Phil Dickie's book, *The Road to Fitzgerald and Beyond*. During the mid-1990s there was at least one cabinet minister in every Australian state serving a sentence for corruption. The injustice of such large-scale corruption alongside the difficulty of enough money to subsist on a benefit did not escape the notice of the alternative lifestyle participants.

Using now famous photocopied pink pamphlets (containing extremely well researched material) and signs mounted on top of his vehicle as his main weapons, Fast Buck\$ took on the Australian magnate Alan Bond and the proposed Ocean Shores development, and won. Bond, bankrupted, attempted to sue Fast Buck\$ in the Supreme Court for defamation and failed.³⁵⁰ Bond was later jailed for corporate fraud, owing A\$14 billion, or a tenth of the national debt.³⁵¹ Fast Buck\$ was elected to the nearby Byron Council in June 1998, and as you might guess from his name, stood on a more general anarchist, anti-corruption ticket.

Film makers

Locally owned Gaia Films produced the wonderful documentary series *Nearly Normal Nimbin*, which explored the alternative lifestyle phenomenon in Nimbin from an insider's point of view and used footage from 20 years of filming in the village. The series was broadcast on a national television channel and later re-broadcast by popular demand.³⁵² Through their films they have expressed concerns for society, for health and for the environment, and they have played an educational and organisational role whilst doing so.

Gaia Films produced a film on home-birth, *Birth and Beyond – The Birth of Willow Raintree*. On conservation issues they have produced: *Give Trees A Chance*, *Triangle of Life*, *Earth First*, and *Blowpipes and Bulldozers*. *Give Trees A Chance* and *Triangle of Life*

³⁵⁰ “No \$aint – but no fool,” *Northern Star*, 5 June 1998, 7; “Bucking the system with a dose of salts,” *Northern Star*, 3 June 1998, 8.

³⁵¹ John Pilger, *Hidden Agendas*, 1998, 229.

³⁵² Personal communication with Jeni Kendell, 4th May 1998.

both won awards, and the documentary, *Blowpipes and Bulldozers* received seven international awards and was seen by 900 million people.³⁵³

Gaia Films also made *Didjeridu*, a half-hour documentary about Charlie McMahon and the band Gondwanaland. In addition to their own documentaries, they have worked on many others. In other words, they have given voice to the alternative lifestyle community and to Aboriginal people by enabling them to tell their stories.

Gaia Films offered their film, *Cry From The Heart*, to the Australian public on National Sorry Day, 26 May 2000. The film is about the “stolen generation” of Aboriginal children, who were taken from their parents to be “properly” brought up by white Australian families, and many of whom were effectively indentured to the white families that cared for them. Before being screened on the SBS television channel, the film was premiered at the local Bush Theatre cinema.³⁵⁴

In 1988 a woman called Lorraine Mafi-Williams made a film about the exploits of an Aboriginal warrior. The film was called *Eelemarni*, and it was the first to come out of NSW that was produced, directed and written by an Aborigine. Lorraine Mafi-Williams has family ties to three of the local tribes, including the Bundjalung. The story was told by the filmmaker’s aunt, Mrs Millie Boyd, in both Githrabaul and English, and acted out by Mrs Boyds’ nieces, nephews, and grandchildren.³⁵⁵

Bush Traks multimedia centre

The Bush Traks multimedia centre is an unusual business to find in a small country town. The recording studio part of the centre was established in the early 1980s, and boasts a 24-track professional recording studio with an Australia-wide reputation. Their

³⁵³ This video is further evidence of the involvement of Nimbin people in the preservation of rainforests elsewhere. See LAND USE PATTERNS: Exporting eco-activism, page 224.

³⁵⁴ “Re: ‘Cry From The Heart,’” *Nimbin News*, April-May 2000, 4-5.

³⁵⁵ “New film from northern NSW,” *Rainbow News*, March 1988, 14.

internet home page lists the wide range of services they offer which include multimedia CD-ROM production and enhanced (audio, data and video) CD production, web page production, interactive presentations (for corporate promotions and educational use), album cover design and production, CD burning services.³⁵⁶ They are very well placed to take advantage of the proliferation of internet users to distribute material created and recorded in Nimbin.

The existence of the recording studio provides not only an inexpensive means of recording material for both local and visiting musicians but also a training centre for aspiring recording technicians, web designers, programmers, copy-writers, artists and performers.

The business is currently on the market and is being advertised over the internet. The asking price for the entire business (including recording equipment) is A\$185,000.³⁵⁷ The advertisement says, "Buy this studio and you've bought yourself a job in paradise."

This recording studio is a commercial strata title unit in a rural arts complex (a converted butter factory) which is conveniently situated in a quiet leafy creek bank location just outside the culturally buzzing village of Nimbin (the alternative capital of Australia!)

BushTraks Website.³⁵⁸

Bush Traks allows the production of cultural works (music and multimedia compact discs) that otherwise might not make it "commercially." In addition to the studio time (rent) and expertise (wages for technical help) being cheaper than in the city, affordability is achieved by doing smaller runs, and by selling directly to the public.

³⁵⁶ <http://www.nimbin.net/bushtraks/multimed.htm>

³⁵⁷ The price was also given in US dollars. This is an internet norm, United States dollars and United States English are the defaults, again demonstrating the influence of core economies.

³⁵⁸ Address: <http://www.best.com/bushtrak/sforsale>

12.4 Language, class consciousness and ideology

One of the cultural products of the alternative lifestyle is new language. Language is a cultural product that directly reflects the material interests of a cultural group. While a full linguistic analysis of the counter-culture is outside the scope of this project, what people talk about is a key indicator of their material concerns and necessarily becomes an important focus for a Marxist analysis of a culture.

Moreover, there is that immense area of ideological communication that cannot be pinned down to any one ideological sphere: the area of communication in human life, human behaviour. ... On one side, it links up directly with the processes of production; on the other, it is tangent to the spheres of the various specialized and fully fledged ideologies. ... [T]he material of behavioural communication is pre-eminently the *word*.

Volosinov, *Marxism and The Philosophy of Language*, 1973, 14.

If you look at the ideology of belonging to a class there is a distinction between people's subjective view of themselves and the material aspect of the ideologies that underlie their practice. Looking at important ideologies as the basis for our analysis gives us a different perspective on the ideas of individuals. It shows that there is a realm, a gap, between the particular material practice and its instantiation as a viewpoint or idea in the mind of any given individual. This means that there is a gap between the actual material basis and the ideology that supports it, and shows why individualist and subjective views of ideology are partial and incoherent.

The problem is that real forms of cultural understanding are broken up and distorted by an omnipresent ideology of individualism. Some values are detached from the cultural and projected onto individuals and their internal characteristics, other aspects of the cultural are de-contextualised, atomised and associated with the intrinsic natures of particular jobs.

Willis, *Learning to Labour*, 1977, 187.

The language of work-processes (what gets said at work) is an ideological practice distinct from any answer you might give to a question about your status at work. There is a real practice in which words are exchanged in the course of regulating work processes, and that material ideology is reflected in the sound waves in the air that make

up the communication that regulates work process. These two discourses, “work speech” and “speech about work,” relate to the way you live out your connection to your class in itself and for itself, respectively.

Alternative lexicology

There are many usages of English that are specific to the alternative culture, or at least their common use has its roots in the fact that the word was popularised by the alternatives. Many words like *groovy*, *far out*, *spunky*, *heavy*, *rad*, *cool*, *babe*, *doll*, *fab*, which were inherited from the 1950s Beatnik era, were out of use by the mainstream until their renaissance among teenagers in the late-1990s. These words were “conserved” by the alternative lifestyle participants. This conservation of words and expressions has led some commentators to think that the alternative culture is somehow trapped in a time warp.³⁵⁹

In fact, language preservation can be seen as a by-product of migration. Anachronistic features of alternative culture can be related to the way that a group of migrants retain expressions that date to the time of their migration.³⁶⁰ Linguistically the alternative lifestyle community comprises a partially isolated community whose stock of words and expressions was formed at the time of their migration. This linguistic stock is to a greater and lesser degree preserved by the population group as a whole. The conservation of some linguistic forms and the development of others can usefully trace the changes in the interests of the alternative lifestyle community. The retention of some of those linguistic forms, and the creation of new ones, can be a conscious act of culture.

³⁵⁹ See TOURISM: Culture as a commodity, page 273.

³⁶⁰ Another example is the dated form of English used by the descendants of William Marsters living on Palmerston Atoll in the Cook Islands. Many of the Marsters family living on Palmerston Atoll still wear Abe Lincoln-style beards as well as speaking with a dated vocabulary and a Gloucester accent. For more information on this linguistic “fossil” as the author describes it, see the *New Zealand Geographic*, Number 11, 59.

The names that alternative lifestyle participants have used to describe *themselves* charts changing attitudes and experiences – not only about how they see themselves and want to present themselves – but how they have responded to and adapted the names that other people call them. Formerly *hippies* and *heads*, then *new settlers* and *new ageists* and *Aquarians*. Later, some called themselves *freaks* and *ferals*. In the late 1990s most seemed happy with *alternative lifestyle participants* or *alternatives*.³⁶¹ Significantly, the straights have remained straights since the beginning of the alternative lifestyle migration to Nimbin in 1973, and hostile straights are still *red necks*.

Another example of the boundary marking effect of language is by the use of “obscene” language. The widespread use of the word *fuck* in the 1970s (and to some extent now) demonstrates that well, because it was not in common parlance at the time, and decent middle-class people did not use such words in public.³⁶² The use of “bad” language acted as a boundary marker, it divided people into straights and non-straights. I have friends from Nimbin who taught people how to be radio hosts and who were djs on a late-night radio show. In 1984 they were completely banned from the community access radio station in Lismore for playing the band, The Dead Kennedys, song *Too Drunk to Fuck* at 3.00am because the song contained offensive language and contravened the station regulations.

Terms for cannabis reflect its centrality to the alternative lifestyle. In the main body of this thesis I have restricted myself to the terms cannabis, marijuana and pot, but there is a wide use of puns and evocative expressions used in the drug culture.

Cannabis sativa is a mildly hallucinogenic (psycho-active) drug. In various qualities it is also known as *buds*, *cabbage*, *dak*, *dope*, *gear*, *grass*, *green*, *gunga*, *heads*, *hemp*, *herb*, *hooch*, *indica* (sometimes abbreviated to *deec*), *leaf and tip*, *marijuana*, *maryjane*, *millers*, *mull*, *pot*.

³⁶¹ See also Metcalf, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986, 1.5, 17.

³⁶² Remember the out-cry over the Nixon tapes and how for some the fact that the President used obscene language eclipsed the real scandal.

shit, sinsemilla, skunk, smoke, tea, wacky-baccy, weed. In the early days, marijuana imported from Asia came tied to bamboo skewers and were known as *buddha-sticks*.

Cannabis leaf is purchased in small quantities known variously as a *twist, tinny, deal, bullet, silverfish, garlic-bread*, or *foil*. These terms describe how the cannabis is retailed in a twist of paper or rolled in tinfoil. Typically a deal contains enough for three joints. Many terms like “garlic-bread” arise with the need for security on home delivery services and are constantly replaced by new ones.

Marijuana is sometimes sold by weighted quantity, such as an ounce, nicknamed an *oz* (to rhyme with Wizard of Oz), as a *baggie* (a quantity in a zip-seal sandwich bag) or (more rarely) by the kilo. It is stored in a *stash, mull-bag* or a *pouch*.

Cannabis is smoked in *pipes, cones, bong*s (home-made water-pipes), and *hookahs*. You *mull-up* (cut cannabis leaf into small pieces) for a *cone* (a reference to the receptacle at the end of the pipe or hookah). Other methods of taking the drug include *bum-nuts* (encasing pot in cigarette papers and swallowing the package whole) or *sniff-balls* (a way of using small quantities by wrapping them in foil, pricking it all over, then applying flame and inhaling the smoke) or baking it into *brownies* or *cookies*. Marijuana is seldom used for as a herbal infusion on account of price, but this was a traditional method of taking it as a medicine.

Hashish and *hash oil* is cannabis resin at various viscosities. Hashish often contains pollen and tends to be of a crumblier consistency, and hash oil is usually chemically extracted from the plant. Small quantities are sold in capsules, known as *caps*. More ephemeral names (like “garlic bread” is for a deal) included *myadec* (after the brand-name of the empty capsule), and *30-40* (a pun on a common oil brand). Hash is either smeared onto cigarette papers before a joint is rolled, or *spotted* onto a hot metal object and the vaporised oils inhaled through a funnel. Sometimes it is made into *hash brownies* and eaten. Cannabis resin is either spotted or crumbled into joints.

A *joint* is a cannabis cigarette. Sometimes also known as a *blunt*, *dooby*, *j*, *marley* (a large joint), *number*, *reefer* (now used only in a consciously archaic or jocular way), *roll*, *smoke* and *spliff*. There are different descriptions for smoking a joint. Usually you take *puffs*, or *tokes*, or you can *charge-up*, or have a *blast*. (These last are also used to describe taking other drugs.)

A *shotgun* (or *shottie*) involves two people, one of whom inhales from a joint, then not exhaling the smoke, reverses the joint (so the lit end is in their mouth) and finally exhales through the joint as the second person inhales the cooled and intensified double mixture. The butt-end of a joint is known as a *bogart* or *roach*. To *bogart a joint* is to fail to pass it on in a timely manner. You can hold the short butt (because they are usually filterless) in a *roach-clip*, a device designed so you don't burn your fingers.

To *deal* is to sell illegal drugs, and a *dealer* is a seller of illegal drugs, pejoratively known as *peddler* or *pusher* by non-users. To buy drugs is to *score*. To be *busted* is to be arrested for drug possession, and it is sometimes the result of having been *dobbed* (informed upon). Informers are known as *dobbers* or *narcs* (formerly from "narcotics agents" but now used for anyone who gives information to the police.)

To *od* or to *drop* is to overdose on narcotics.³⁶³ An overdose causes narcolepsy, narcotic-induced sleepiness and a suppression of vagus nerve function (which controls breathing). *Nodding* is a mild form of narcolepsy. When someone over-doses on narcotics the vagus nerve is affected and the automatic breathing reflex is impaired or shut down, the most common way narcotics users die (along with inhaling vomit).

Heroin is also known as *smack*. A single use amount is known as a *hit*, or a *taste*. Needle users *hit up*, *shoot up*, *turn on*, *charge up* or *have a blast*. Sometimes they do it in a *shooting gallery* (the Nimbin public toilets were frequently described in these terms.) Names for the drug that have fallen from use include *horse* and *junk*. Smoking opium

³⁶³ There are no known fatalities from overdoses of cannabis.

was in the past known as *chasing the dragon*. Users of heroin are known as *junkies*, *smack-heads*, *heads*, *addicts*, *drug fiends*, *druggies*, *freaks*, *mainliners* and *users*.

Stoned is being under the influence of drug, most commonly of cannabis but also used to describe being affected by heroin. Also known as *blown away*, *cabbaged*, *coned*, *having a little buzz*, *charged-up*, *faceless*, *high*, *off-your-face*, *out-of-it*, *perked*, *potted*, *rat-arsed*, *ripped*, *shit-faced*, *smashed*, *snotted*, *stoked*, *wasted*, *whacked*, *wiped out*, or *zonked*. *Spaced-out* has dropped from common usage. An addicted person is a *user* (of drugs) who has a *habit*.

An analysis of “hippy lingo” collated on a website shows a fairly typical pattern. In keeping with the notion that the most important constituent items will be most highly represented, we find 22 of the 53 terms and phrases to be drug related, seven of which refer to the sensation associated with taking drugs.³⁶⁴ Items that I coded slogan/philosophy, like *Ban the Bomb*, account for a further ten of these terms. Items of ethnically hippie appearance rate six mentions: an example of this category is *freak flag* to mean long hair, at one time a stereotypical marker of alternative. Nine of the phrases in the list were conversational slang, for example, *right on* and *crash pad*. Terms referring to persons list only *junkies* and *freaks*, and terms for the police include *pigs* and *fuzz*. The remaining two items on the list explain what beanbags and incense are.

Some of these words and expressions show how a sub-culture can take ordinary words and transform their meanings to meet their own needs. I believe that the driving force for the proliferation of drug terms is their illegality. Compare the prohibition of cannabis with the alcohol prohibition, and the number of terms we have for alcohol that are derived from that period of repression. Interestingly, *hooch* has transferred from illegal alcohol to illegal cannabis. Relatively few terms for alcohol are being generated these days, although every generation creates new expressions for being drunk as they come to experience alcohol use for themselves (particularly when they are still under-age). The

³⁶⁴ See <http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/Andes/5333/lingo.html>. Interestingly the drug Benzedrine rates three mentions, perhaps the favoured drug of the complier.

transformation of words act as a protective mechanism, allowing people within a culture to communicate with each other using ordinary phrases despite the presence of outsiders.

Naming patterns

The naming of children is an important aspect of human activity and the choice of name usually reflects the interests and culture of the parents and their aspirations for their child. According to a newly released book the most common names used in Australia are, for boys, Jack, Thomas, Joshua, Lachlan, William, James, Alexander, Matthew, Nicholas and Hugh. The most common names for girls are Charlotte, Georgia, Isabel (and variants), Emily, Rachel, Emma, Lily, Chloe, Olivia and Catherine.³⁶⁵

Compare these with identifiably alternative names like Summer, Dove, Storm, Tigerlily, or names from cultures other than their own, most particularly Indian and Amerindian names like Kapil, Ra, Tulsi, and Cheyenne. Alternative lifestyle parents have distinct naming patterns for their children that can help identify them as part of a different ethnicity from the mainstream.

[Y]ou just sit in class and look around and there'll be like three or four clumps of kids who are the big, blonde, freckly red-haired kids with big ears and strong features, and they're the farming families, with Edna and Sheryl and Tommy, Lee and John. And then there'll be Hiawatha, Sudipta, Brahma, Apple, Fern-frond ... [laughs] all those sorts of kids as well.

Interview with Mickey, October 1997.

The term "clumps" further suggests a sense of difference between straight and alternative children and shows the social boundaries between the cultural groups. The alternative names acquire a political significance in much the same way that other ethnic names do.

³⁶⁵ Cecily Dynes, *Baby Names For Australia and New Zealand*, HarperCollins, 2000. Reported in the *Evening Post*, 11 September 2000, 12.

My partner's identical twin nieces are called Flame and Lake. Their names come from a passage in the *I Ching*, "the leaping lake, the clinging flame," that their mother was reading around the time of their birth. They have no second names. The names, Lake and Flame, signal the strong likelihood of "alternative" parentage. The fact of their having no other name means they are constantly required to *reassert* this difference to the mainstream, and leads to absurdities like a telephone listing as Flame Flame, because "the computer won't accept just one name."

This is not to say that all alternative parents select a "hippie" name for their children, but that there is a tradition for doing so. They might just as well choose a "straight" name, like the ever-popular "John" for example, because they simply like it, or were a fan of John Lennon, or had some favoured friend who shared that name. So saying, there are a large number of identifiably alternative names that are in use within this cultural context.

Mum said she was going to call me Willow Wand, but then she said I looked too much like a trunk, so she called me Willow Raintree.

Sensitive New Age Guise, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

Analysis of a collection of 276 "hippie" names has shown that nature-inspired names form the most popular alternative names.³⁶⁶ These are followed in popularity by exotic and attributional names, then religious or spiritual principal names, mythical or heroic entity names, and lastly, art-inspired names.

I found of the 276, the majority (165) of alternative names were nature-derived. Nature-derived names include Willow, Hawk, Honey and Rain. I analysed these by sub-categories of celestial (29), calendrical (12) and jewel (15). Celestial names include names like Moon, Sunny and Cassiopeia. The calendrical sub-category included names

³⁶⁶ The internet site reference is <http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/Andes/5333/names.html>. I added some names of people I knew (or knew of) to this list.

such as Summer and June, and the jewel sub-category included Amethyst, Jade and Onyx.³⁶⁷

A further 56 names were attributional. Such names included Harmony, Peace, Hope and Verity. These names have been resurrected from (relative) disuse, like the “attributional” names popular among the Puritans.

Another 20 were based on a mythical entity or hero, for example Phoenix, Oberon and Dylan.³⁶⁸ A surprising number (30) of names embodied a religious principle such as Dharma, Aura and Zen. Interestingly, religious principle names tend to also be exotic. Exotic names (in the sense of being recognisably “foreign” in this context) accounted for 53 of the names, and included names such as Vishnu, Moana, Shalom, and Rangi. Within this category, the names of places such as India, China, and Sheba accounted for sub-category of 10. A category of “art” covered 11 of the names considered, and included names like Allegra, Dancer and Paisley.

Quite often alternative children don’t have surnames, or have surnames chosen by their parents or by themselves, rather than inherited from them. These different naming patterns signal another cultural difference from the straight community, who often trace their names back to family, in particular, their surnames. The tradition of women taking their husband’s surname on marriage is another contested naming pattern, along with the question of whose surname (if any) any children of the relationship will use.

³⁶⁷ This is a naming pattern that is also seeing a resurgence in more mainstream families – Pearl, Ruby, and Beryl are all examples of this. The alternatives are likely to consider a wider variety of gemstones, not just the ones likely to be found in books like *A Pocket Guide to First Names*, Collins, 1974.

³⁶⁸ These are derived from the mythical beast, Phoenix, arising from the ashes; Oberon is a character in Shakespeare’s play, *A Midsummer Nights Dream*; Dylan is likely a reference to the entertainer Bob Dylan or the poet Dylan Thomas.

Friends of mine selected a new surname for their child, rather than give her one of their surnames. The new surname was the name of a writer that they both admired. When she had another child in a later relationship, the new baby shared the surname of his elder sibling. The new baby's first name, Jasper, followed the same theme as his older sibling, Jade. Jasper's name was chosen to reflect their sibling relationship and as their mother put it, "so that they felt related to each other." These naming patterns reflect different cultural priorities to mainstream culture.

Changing names is not unusual among alternatives. Like other people who change their names (like for example, people taking religious orders) they are making a symbolic break with their old selves. Marriage and marriage dissolution are the most common events leading to name changing in straight society. Anecdotal experience suggests some of the children of alternative lifestyle participants change their names (many briefly, some permanently) to more conventional ones, particularly during their teenage years. This relates to the fact of their alternative identification is an attenuated version of their parents decision.

Naming ceremonies are seldom held in a church nor officiated over by a representative of a mainstream religious institution.³⁶⁹ While baptism by an ordained minister of, say, the Anglican church or a Catholic priest are extremely rare, religious ceremonies celebrating the naming of a child by practitioners of "Eastern" religions are less so.

The following story shows that naming patterns for properties also reflect cultural priorities. These were thrown into contrast when an unacceptable name was suggested for a hamlet on the Tuntable community property.

"They did things like—when they formed a hamlet, you can set up a few houses and give it a name if you like, so they've all got these names that are Tolkien—Lothlorien and Lantana Island and all sorts of nice bushy names. Skinny John wanted call to his Rat Hole. They said, 'No, you can't do it.' He came back later

³⁶⁹ By mainstream religion I am talking in terms of the cultural context of white middle-class Australia.

with his second proposal, 'Rath Olé.' I don't know if it got past them, but that was his idea, if only he'd worded it 'Rath Olé' in the first place it would've got in, no worries, but because he wanted Rat Hole, it wasn't on, it wasn't cosmic enough."

Interview with Micky, June 1998.

Humour

Joke rituals can smooth a social interaction by forming a transition from the impersonal to the human/personal, moving the dialogue from the compulsory to the voluntary. They can also enforce a social boundary when major value differences are shown. In-jokes are also boundary markers in that they only have real currency among those who share the joke. "Not seeing what's so funny" is a sign (to all participants in the interaction) of insider and outsider status. The feeling of being mocked usually leads to a sense of alienation from the "other" party and serves to maintain the boundaries. Consider the following example:

Two hippies met a nun with her arm in a sling on the street. "What happened to your arm?" asked one of the hippies.

"I slipped on the soap and fell while having a shower," said the nun.

"Oh, bad luck," said the hippie sympathetically.

Later, when the nun was out of earshot, the second hippie turned to the first and said, "What's soap?" The first said, "I dunno. I'm not Catholic."

Fieldnotes.

This joke was told to me by a straight Catholic farmer. I think it has several levels of humour. Beyond the obvious stereotype, "hippies are dirty" implication, the joke has a dig at arcane Catholic practices as well. Over the years I have formed the impression that joke telling (in the manner of the hippies and nuns joke) is relatively rare among alternatives, and despite the fact they joke about themselves, they tend to find jokes that rely on typecasts to be offensive.

Instead the alternatives use a different kind of humour to lay bare differences between themselves and others. This humour often takes the things that mainstream people say about the alternative culture and re-work it – often making it funny and positive.

Humour can also be a protective mechanism – it can defuse situations and it can bolster group and individual self-esteem against the attacks on lifestyle and values by outsiders. An interview with Andy brought this protective function of humour to light when, together with his friends, they re-worked his mother's expression of disgust at his recently declared homosexuality into a funny song.

I'd heard from Johnny that he'd overheard the conversation when they read the letter and my mother—all my mother had been able to say was, "Ugh! I can't even think about it, it makes my flesh creep!" of which we all made up an extensive song where most of the words were flesh creep and body movements ...

Interview with Andy, September 1995.

Like other ethnic responses, this included taking the straight terms and ideas used to denigrate their culture and re-working them to have a positive meaning or as self-parody. The words of the following song to show well how this alternative humour works.

You know once I used to live down in the city
Dodging policemen, and cars and trams and trucks
But now I've got the fresh air and the gum trees
Where I've learned how to sing and how to dance

Chorus:

Well, I'm a dope-smoking bi-sexual hippie
I don't think you'd let your daughter marry me
You know I'm on the dole and I like playing rock and roll
But I'm hungry so please take me home to tea ... [Doug McPherson.]

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

The use of epithet "freak" is another example of a derogatory term that has been re-worked to have a positive connotation. The alternative lifestyle participants also use negative stereotypes against people who attack them and their culture. There are "red-neck farmers who don't think for themselves," and who are believed to be up-tight, ignorant, intolerant and bigoted. However, these stereotypes are rarely transformed into jokes like the nuns and hippies joke.

Body language

Body language is another form of communication that is a distinctly cultural practice. Crane and Angrosino say that how people use space can communicate in much the same way as much as tone of voice.³⁷⁰ It can be, like spoken language, “formal or informal, warm or cold, public or private, masculine or feminine, indicative of high or low status.” While this might seem difficult to define in any acceptably scientific way, they say that the different use of space can be quite reliably measured between cultures.

[P]roxemics – the relative proximity of people to one another in various situations and in various societies. [Edward T. Hall] shows that how people handle space in connection with their human interactions can silently tell us a great deal. ... [E]ach society of the world has different patterns of space use ... [T]he standard distances between them in public conversations ... are quite standardised.

Crane & Angrosino, *Field Projects in Anthropology*, 1974, 23.

Emboldened by this, I would argue that the alternative lifestyle population tend to touch more – both publicly and privately. They tend towards “equality” in physical body language. For example, seldom would you see an alternative “standing over” someone who is sitting while holding a conversation. They would sit or squat down beside the person they were talking “with” (rather than talking to).



The alternative debutantes ball was in marked contrast to the formalised dress and custom of the “real” debutantes ball. For their official photo, the alternative debs have cross-dressed, have bare feet or wear work boots and generally have more trouble with their décolletage than their more modestly attired straight counterparts.
Photo: Northern Star.

³⁷⁰ Crane & Angrosino, *Field Projects in Anthropology*, 1974, 24.



The street outside the Nimbin Museum is an extension of the ordinary daily space of several of these people. While straight use of public space (such as outdoor cafés) sees people using the street, they are not usually so relaxed and "at home." A photograph in the tourism section shows another group of locals similarly relaxed in the same space.
Photo: Ben Rotteveel.

The alternative lifestylers use of public space is more permissive. Generally speaking their body language demonstrates a much lower level of formality in both public and private space. Alternatives tend to stand closer to each other in public spaces and frequently touch each other during conversation. There is much more male-to-male touching than you would typically see on the streets in small Australian towns.³⁷¹

More than 70 people sat in a traditional Nimbin circle this week at the Nimbin Town Hall and agreed to create a new type of political forum to discuss, advocate and lobby for solutions to improve the quality of life of village residents.

"Nimbin Forum," *Northern Star*, 12 December 1998, Front-page.

³⁷¹ Marianne Wex, *Let's Take Back Our Space*, 1979.

In public meetings too, there is a tendency for casual rather than formal seating layout. In the book, *Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982*, there is a wonderful photograph of a school meeting with the parents, children and teachers all sitting on mats in the classroom.⁵⁷ This has the effect of equalising the body language (no-one has a more important position than the others) and the philosophies that informed those proxemics persist today.

These are the kinds of usage of public space that help to make up the street scene in Nimbin and outsiders can find it intimidating because they misinterpret it as something more than a simple difference in the use of space. In the city, too, passing through the middle of a large group of people is not always a safe thing to do. One informant also suggests that there is a cultural difference in the use of public space between the migratory waves that have populated Nimbin.

{W}here the freaks would sit in coffee shops or out the back playing cards, the ferals would sit in the gutter and sit on the footpath. ...

Interview with Iona, October 1997.

From an analysis of photographs, I think you could make a strong argument that the alternative movement as a whole, rather than just the sub-group of the ferals, is more likely to use public space in this way. However, the ferals do have a tendency to congregate in larger groups that tends to spill them off public seating and into the gutters.

Icons

The alternative lifestyle culture is very adept at language use, and of the use of icons. The number of names for drugs reflects the fact that drugs are the single most important cultural and economic items in the alternative lifestyle. Likewise cannabis has come to symbolically represent (part of) the alternative culture.

⁵⁷ *Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982*, 1982, 120.

Any such artistic-symbolic image to which a particular physical object gives rise is already an ideological product. The physical object is converted into a sign. Without ceasing to be a part of material reality, such an object, to some degree, reflects and refracts another reality.

Volosinov, *Marxism and The Philosophy of Language*, 1973, 9.



Generally speaking the alternative lifestyle participants are more concerned with the message and less concerned with spelling, and punctuation. This has lead to a great deal of debate regarding the education of their children. Sometimes spellings are altered on purpose, to signal a difference between alternative “kulture” and “culcha” and the mainstream “culture,” for example, or to differentiate between straight women and politicised wimmin. Some people use icons in written text, for example, Roni St*rr (sometimes Roni *) who writes for the *Nimbin News*. Then of course there are people with politically motivated and inventive names like Prohibition End, John Freemarijuana, and the Byron Bay local body politician, Fast Buck\$.³⁷³

Dialectical engagement with issues (for example, cannabis legalisation) can be shown when those issues are taken up as icons in symbolic and ritual practices. As Carol de Launey notes,

The village and surrounding areas are targeted annually for plantation squad operations, which use helicopters and ground support vehicles. These regular police activities have been incorporated into village festivals, with a papier-mache helicopter appearing in marches and theatre.

de Launey, *Commercial Cannabis Crop Growers in Northern NSW*, 1996.

There is a “culture” of “alternative culture,” that has a straight-alternative interface. It includes the “dope-smoking hippie” and “dirty hippie” clichés. It also includes the “utopian dreamer” like straight television interviewer’s ideas of the Aquarian migrants, they are seen as having to do everything in pursuit of an ideal or dream, and are

³⁷³ See also the campaign of Prohibition End for the NSW State Lower House election, CLASS FOR ITSELF: State and Federal Elections, page.461.

constantly asked if the culture works, or accused of selling out if cultural change has taken place. Similarly the emphasis on communes and intentional communities tends to blinker analysis of the more prevalent sole-householder alternative culture.

When a straight person meets an alternative person they both recognise each other's "ethnicity" straight away. Although not unbiased, these stereotypes are a source of knowledge about the other. As social interactions develop, the stereotypes are also learned by the people being stereotyped. A straight person comes to know what a stereotypical straight is, and the alternative person knows what a stereotype "alternative" is. These stereotypes are "recognised" into existence in any social interaction in public or between strangers when members of these different ethnicity's meet.

Not only are these stereotypes now tokens – icons – which can be used in the interaction (potentially as a polite protocol), but those stereotypes are also usable within intra-group culture as boundary-marking ritual cultural activity.³⁷⁴ That knowledge can be used politely if co-operation is sought. The alternative person knows not to complain about "red-neck farmers," and the straight person knows not to suggest locking up all marijuana users or cutting off all benefits to alternative lifestyle participants.

Like "alternative," "straight" is also a complex of signals. Straights tend to have no tattoos, short hair, shaven, conservative clothing, a particular way of speaking, a legal vehicle driven by someone with a licence. Mainstream religious affiliation, legal marriage, voting National (or less usually Labor), and meat eating can all be inferred. Because these complexes are genuinely (if not perfectly) related, stereotypes are formed from the alternative view of straights and the straight view of alternatives.

³⁷⁴ A list of stereotypical hippy habits provided on a website included driving a Kombi, smoking "naughty" things, listening to the music of The Grateful Dead, burning incense, promoting love, having long hair, finding wisdom in Dr Seuss, and loving rainbows.

<http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/Andes/5333/habits.html>

12.5 A political statement or cultural expression?

Many domestic practices, for example food, health, appearance, and naming practices embody ideological preferences and processes more strongly than they do economic ones. While these cultural practices (for example, clothing style) are conditioned by economics (lack of money) in the final analysis their expression is found in uniquely “hippie” forms that are determined more by the ideology than by income. Cultural practices like attire, eating habits and speech patterns also show a politicised ethnic identity, a point I will return to.

Appearance

In order to maintain themselves as an alternative or a counter-culture it is necessary for the alternative lifestyle culture to recreate itself. Boundaries can be maintained (with relatively little effort) by external things like appearance and by language. Long hair and bare feet were strong “hippie” markers in the early days. In the following account, Andy’s attire acted as a statement, a boundary marker, for which he “got shit” from his relations.

I became a hippie really. My hair grew and I stopped wearing shoes. [...] We went out home for Christmas and it was a debacle. Matt and I went out without shoes, which was the thing that broke my mother up, she burst into tears. “You could’ve at least [sob] worn shoes.” [Sigh]. We thought we were making a sacrifice by even coming back.

Interview with Andy, July 1995.

The alternative lifers have identifiable hair and clothing styles, and they are fairly easy to pick on the streets on this basis alone. Clothing is worn in specific ways in a manner that taken collectively has created a style. This demonstrates the intensified use of clothing by the alternatives as a cultural symbol by a minority culture. The issue of clothing is not just a matter of personal taste, but is in fact an indisputably political act. The distinctive alternative style of dress can protect them from many of the employment

possibilities suited to their skills if they don't want to work. Their attire announces them as alternative, to which a variety of stereotyped attributes can be inferred.³⁷⁵

Suits and neckties are generally derided by the alternative culture as a "uniform." When wearing a suit is unavoidable (for example, when they are working in the city) they still manage to subvert the rule. A friend of mine is an urban alternative and a government employee. He is required by the dress standard of his department to wear a suit and tie to work. He complies with the letter of the law, but not it's intention, by wearing (hideous) second-hand 1970s suits together with brightly coloured floral or paisley shirts and an American-style string tie. This is a highly successful inversion of the dress code and represents a daily protest against "uniforms." While the corporation can describe suitable categories and minimum standards of dress, it can't legislate for taste (or lack of it), which is a freedom he exploits.

The "hippie style" is comprised of comfortable, usually cheap and often second hand, low-care clothing. Tracksuits would meet these criteria, and yet are seldom worn. The notion that "I am free to wear anything" is in fact fictional: there are definite rules about what is acceptable as alternative attire.

Slavery to fashion is considered one of the most shallow and conformist aspects of straight culture, and an unnecessary expense. A freedom from the rigid "interpretation" of what are acceptable combinations is one defining characteristic and a freer use of colour is another. Longer flowing things are more acceptable for men – like lava lavas (sulus) and loose-fitting harem pants. I think this reflects the influence of the Pacific Islands and Asia. Alternative lifestyle males can make use of the increased acceptance of this kind of attire in straight Western society.

And slowly, little things like, you see feral boys walking around in floral dresses in the summer, which is, I reckon, wonderful. The big bush boots, footy socks, and dreads maybe all tied back and ... a nice floral dress. Which is good, because, you know, it's sort of funny, but it also, women've been allowed to wear pants for years,

³⁷⁵ "Reflections of Women on Tuntable Falls," *Nimbin News*, August-September 1998, 4.

but men ... still risk life and limb wearing a dress in public, like, they really do. The other look I like is tights and long shirt or tee-shirt or something. Almost like the medieval look. And not getting beaten up for being a poofster. Which is just ridiculous, still having to fight over shit like that.

Interview with Micky, October 1997

Few rural alternative lifestyle people do ironing or make their own clothes. Many lack the proper tools (sewing machines and 240 volt (mains) power for example) and tailoring skills. In any case clothing can be more cheaply purchased than made. Despite the relative poverty of many alternative lifestyle participants, mending is optional too: unrepaired clothing is acceptable street wear. During one of my field trips the mother of an alternative lifestyle participant wanted to purchase some new clothes for her grandson. The grandmother didn't want to take him to school, "looking like one of those alternative kids." "But Mum, he *is* one of those alternative kids," laughed the daughter. "You know what I mean," said the grandmother grumpily, and that finished



In this photograph you can see someone attending to a small child on the sidewalk. This would look out of place in a city. Again you can see locals using the street as an extension of their personal (home) space. Photo: Northern Star.

the conversation. In the meantime, the other grandmother was searching for needle and thread to repair the child's clothes – after having ironed his school clothes (their first ironing ever). In these activities we can see different domestic (cultural) priorities being expressed by the straight grandparents and alternative daughter.

I think that the "looseness" of alternative body language is partly because loose fitting and inexpensive clothing make this more possible. I think that there is more willingness to sit places that might be considered "too dirty" by someone in their "good clothes" (like on the pavement) and this too fosters the sense of relaxed body language. Alternative people do not treat the ground as if it is somehow toxic, as do other city-raised persons of their class background.

Dressing for town is another of the markers between the hippies and the straight population. For a straight farming person being on the farm and going into town are two

different social situations for which different attire is always appropriate. For an alternative person (coming from the city originally, and often from the slum parts of the city) you are always in town, so dressing up



Public nudity was associated with "alternative" for many years. This picture was taken during the 1973 Aquarius Festival.
Photo: Northern Star. [Picture sourced from the 1998 Visions of Nimbin fund-raising calendar.]

for town is meaningless. Nimbin and the rural areas are identical social spaces for them. The alternatives are sometimes perceived as under-dressed (as well as dirty and stained) because they don't change to go to town, but go in whatever they are wearing.

Public nudity (the silent area of attire) was tolerated by this group long before it was anything less than a scandal by the straight community. Nakedness is less common now, perhaps on account of the hole in the ozone and the increasing danger of skin cancers.

We also used to work naked in the gardens. That's changed a lot, you don't sort of see that much these days. But at that time nearly everybody was naked nearly all the time, it was just part of being a hippie and it was part of being alive in the country in those days. ...[I]n the summer ... I don't think I'd ever wear clothes for weeks at a time. I'd just ... at the end of the day I'd just bathe, in cold ... we never had any hot water or ever wanted it, we didn't have electricity.

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

Interviewer to straight older man: So why wouldn't you want to be a hippie?

Oh, well, that sort of thing doesn't appeal to me in any way, really. If you're going to be ... swimming in the nuddy and all this sort of thing, well, that's not my cup of tea. Uhm, it's just not on as far as I'm concerned, no way.

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

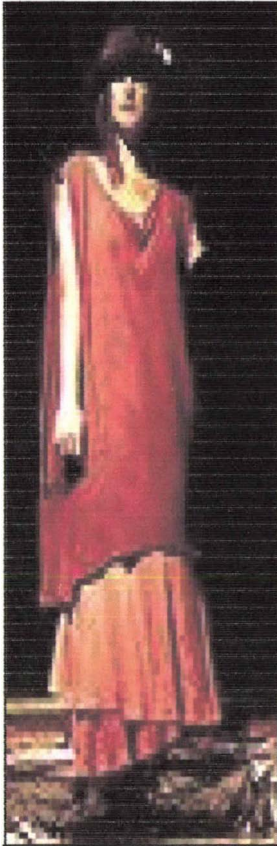
Alternative lifestyle participants seldom wear watches. This reflects a challenge to "industrial time" usually imposed on workers via the work process, and a cultural priority for "organic time." As a watch-wearer I became conscious of this by the number

of people who would ask me the time, not to mention the time I spent waiting for people. Gold is seen by many as “dirty merchants metal” and a demonstration of conspicuous consumption, and alternatives are critical of the environmentally unsafe methods of recovering it. Skin-art (tattoos, piercings, scarification) is more common among this group than among persons of similar socio-economic backgrounds too.

Alternatives are often identifiable by smell in that their clothing is often impregnated by perfumes such as patchouli oil, Karma love oil, fragrant oils, incense (sometimes with an overtone of cannabis and sometimes as an attempt to disguise the smell of cannabis). Makeup is not compulsory, although eyeliner use is almost universal among women and in common use by men (perhaps reflecting Indian cultural influences). Cosmetics can be expensive and a pared-down domestic economy can do without them. Their ideology legitimates this. The cosmetics industry is one of the biggest users of experimental animals and anti-vivisection is one of the concerns of the alternative culture. The Body Shop and Red Earth chains (which began in Australia) were very successful at exploiting this market for products not tested on animals and using natural products like aloe vera and essential oils in their cosmetics. Like other businesses that claim to be green, these companies have unofficial watchdogs and critics making sure they live up to their claims of ecological friendliness.

Beards are common, but no longer *de rigueur*. Body hair (unshaven legs and underarms) is also common with alternative women. The more “natural” appearance of some alternative women is embodied in the alternative’s alternative to Barbie – Feral Sheryl. Among other “identifying” features, she has hairy legs and armpits.³⁷⁶ Long hair for men is not unusual, and was formerly a statement of alternative. These days dreadlocks have replaced long hair on some people. Shaven and sometimes also tattooed heads and dyed

³⁷⁶ Many people (both straight and alternative) asked me if I’d heard about the doll, but I’ve never actually seen Feral Sheryl for sale. This is another case where an alternative icon plays a bigger role than its instantiation (the number of Feral Sheryl dolls in existence) in real life. In any case, she is more likely to be a gift for adults than children, as Feral Sheryl is more of a gimmick than a replacement for Barbie.



This garment is from the Wicked Weave label. The factory was set up in Nimbin, and arose from the annual Hemp Fashion Show. "The show gave the designers a forum for their work and the factory took the design into limited edition range." Garments can be ordered over the internet. This design from Elsibeth Neilson costs A\$500.00. Photo: Wicked Weave website.

hair are also commonly seen among the alternative population. Appearance can broadcast to others whether or not you are part of a particular cultural group.

It was always interesting to leave Nimbin for a few weeks and come back, and usually by the time you'd climbed out of the car, one of the new hot-shot dealer kids on the street would've spotted you and thought you were a first-timer in town and be desperately trying to sell you pot, to the amusement of the people who knew you, and usually to my amusement. ... I mean not so much now I've got my head full of dreads, because people suss I might be a local ...

Interview with Micky, May 1998.

There is a hip couture developing and Nimbin regularly hosts fashion parades. Rainbow coloured silk scarves, calico peasant-style dresses with hemp string lashings etc, silver jewellery, and heavy borrowings from the apparel of other ethnic groups, in particular South American and Indian.³⁷⁷

Another form of acceptance is the acquisition of some of the external features of the culture by some part of the mainstream. There is a current re-discovery of the "hippie" styles of dress and speech among some of the young adult cohort of the late-nineties. Traditional alternative dress and speech patterns have been re-worked into a new form, leaving behind most of the original lifestyle and the "ideological baggage" that once

accompanied "the look." The "retro" look as it was called became more of a fashion statement than a political one. Just because someone says "groovy" and "cool," wears floral shirts, platform shoes and flares, and has long hair, doesn't imply that they believe all (or even any) of the politically significant parts of alternative culture.

³⁷⁷ For example, Susukka Trading is a shop that sells mainly Guatemalan clothing in Nimbin.

Cuisine

Because they strive for integration in their lifestyles, where everything is interconnected to make a whole, the environment, food and health practices cannot be considered apart for the alternative lifestyle participants. As a Marxist I cannot help but see in many of these practices elements of alternative economics such as low household budgets, low investment in domestic technology, high amounts of disposable time. The way that these economic forces are expressed is, of course, a consequence of alternative cultural preferences of the time.

As I argued earlier, the way to look at the unity of the ideology of the alternative movement is that a shared understanding of meanings persists despite the wide number of interpretations that individuals or groups bring to each concept. This can be clearly seen when we look at alternative cuisine. The ideology supporting the practice of vegetarianism, for example, ranges from “I can’t afford it,” to “eating animals is sick, dirty, twisted and unnatural,” to elaborate schemes about the karmic consequences of meat consumption, through to economic and scientific (and quasi-scientific) ideas about the maintenance of the ecology of the planet.

Vegetarianism fits in with their economic position, and is justified on moral and ecological grounds. Like Marvin Harris’ ecological explanation for the origins of the prohibition of cow-killing among Indian peasants, we can look to material aspects of the alternative lifestyle to explain the common practice of vegetarianism among them.³⁷⁸

There are good reasons for the alternative lifestyle participants not to eat meat. First, they had difficulty “growing it,” as they were inexperienced farmers and living on poor land besides. Second, to purchase meat at the shops required cash, and they were on very low incomes. Third, meat spoils easily, and they tended to have neither mains power nor freezers. Fourth, if they grew animals for meat, they’d also have to kill them. These were city people, for whom meat had always previously come nicely wrapped,

³⁷⁸ Marvin Harris, *Cannibals and Kings: The Origins of Cultures*, 1977, 211-232.

and cutting the throat of an animal you've reared since it was born was an unattractive prospect.



Beyond Beef. This street theatre protest by Shana Gelin and Benny Zable (who is also responsible for many of Nimbin's murals) coincides with "Beef Week" in the nearby town of Casino, the "Beef Capital of Australia." Photo: Elke Anstey, from the *Some Children of the Dream* collection. [Picture and caption sourced from the 1998 Visions of Nimbin fund-raising calendar.]

The alternative lifestyle participants, as a generalisation, cook and eat from a wider range of culinary repertoires than the average Australian family, and they adopted certain dishes sooner. They eat less meat (and sometimes none at all) than is normal for the average Australian person from their background. This is explained in terms of cost, health, ecological and moral (anti-vivisectionist) grounds. Instead, they tend to consume vegetable proteins, which are ecologically more "sound," not to mention cheaper. Such foods typically take longer to prepare and require more planning. This is possible because of the time they have at their disposal. For example, beans and pulses are best soaked in advance of cooking and some take considerable time to cook. Even then they

often are further processed into another dish. The preparation of other foods like falafel, tofu, homemade breads and yoghurt are all time-consuming.³⁷⁹

These different eating habits, while superficially they appear minor, also have the effect of demonstrating and maintaining boundaries. Many of the vegetarian alternative lifestyle participants tell “horror” stories of being served meat by straight parents or friends, or of having the meat scraped from their plates and being left with over-boiled greens and root vegetables that had been cooked in animal fats alongside the meat. On their side, the straights entertain doubts about the hygiene of the alternative kitchens. They are not keen on the idea of eating the straight stereotype of an alternative meal – tofu and kidney beans washed down with herbal tea – either.

There is an increasing transfer of vegetarian cuisine into the mainstream – all of which will improve the health of the straights. Eating what were formerly thought of as exotic food stuffs like tabouli, sushi, couscous, or pesto is now much more normal for straights. I think this transfer into the rural mainstream eating habits has happened faster because of the presence of the alternative lifestyle community. The consumer demand for such products has meant that they have become available in the shops earlier than in other rural locales of a similar size. For example, home-style wholemeal bread was baked in Nimbin and available in shops in Lismore very early in the piece.

Norco, the dairy factory in Lismore, produced a low-fat, low-salt cheese, and called it “Nimbin Style” cheese. This was seen as an exploitative cashing-in on Nimbin’s reputation for healthy lifestyles, and for that the company was criticised in the local guide, *Nimbin & Environs*.³⁸⁰

The “silent” area of cuisine is not eating. Fasting is another common food (and health) practice among alternative lifestyle participants that is not generally practiced by

³⁷⁹ More recently these food products have become available pre-prepared as commodities in the shops.

³⁸⁰ *Nimbin & Environs*, No. 3, 1996, 29.

mainstream rural Australians. Food is seen as medicine by many alternatives and “cleansing diets” are common.

Health care

The medical “model” used by alternative healers is holistic – a person’s entire life is looked at, not just the medical “problem.” This holistic approach means that standard (and not so standard) medical practices are combined



with activities promoting mental health such as counselling and massage, coupled with an emphasis on good diet. This paradigm is now being taught to mainstream medical professionals as a normal part of their training.

The new settlers wanted alternatives to the prevailing medical model of surgery and pharmacology. After the Festival Nimbin was left with the first rural acupuncture service in Australia, and alternative healing practices have been flourishing ever since in the region.

Dunstan, *Images From the Edge*, Position Paper, 1994, 6.

The health care culture of the alternative lifers tends to an alternative cultural model that is more holistic and “natural.” The use of non-mainstream medical techniques like homeopathy, herbalism, aromatherapy, massage, acupuncture, osteopathy and chiropractic therapy is normal within this cultural group.

As I have mentioned, the most spectacular success that the alternative lifestyle movement has achieved in this field is the re-definition of childbirth as a natural process rather than a medical event.³⁸¹ Because the benefit peasantry involves a particular kind of (household-centred) production, it engenders this kind of “the personal is political” political concern and activity. The activity that permitted planned home-births in

³⁸¹ See HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTION: Child birth and child-raising practices, page 180.

Australia was a personal freedom campaigned for and won largely through the activities of a committed group of alternative lifestyle participants.

Alternative people protested the prohibition of medicinal herbs like comfrey, saffron, coltsfoot, borage, cannabis, tansy, lobelia, ma'huang and belladonna with the claim, "nature

doesn't make mistakes." The restriction of the use of these herbs was seen as an infringement of the rights of herbalists to prescribe these herbs medicinally and, like the right to homebirth, was presented as an issue of democracy and autonomy.³⁸²



The banner roped to the veranda of the hotel bears the quote, "How absurd is a law that seeks to classify a plant as a crime, as if there were something feloniously wrong with nature."

Photo: Kerry Whitfield.

In the past, allegations of child mortality and disease were used to justify the campaign against the Multiple Occupancy settlements. These allegations came from the stereotype of "dirty hippies" and from the alternatives rejection of many of the scientific medical models of health – such as their opposition to high-intervention hospital-based childbirth for normal deliveries. The alternative lifestyle culture portrays universal immunisation as an unsafe practice, and the objection of many parents to compulsory vaccination of their children against diseases like diphtheria, measles and smallpox was another clash with the mainstream and it remains a topic of considerable debate in the *Nimbin News*.³⁸³ The inclusion of fluoride in water supplies and the dangers of dental amalgam are other contested issues.

³⁸² "Nimbin – A Special Place," *Nimbin News*, June–July 1998, 3.

³⁸³ See for example, "Theory out of date," *Nimbin News*, December 1985, 14; "Vaccination Roulette," an advertisement inserted in the October–November 1997 edition of *Nimbin News*; "Vaccine Fears," and "Gulf War Syndrome Link to Chronic Fatigue," in *Nimbin News*, June–July 1998, 33.

The alternative lifestyle shares with the mainstream the routine use of dangerous drugs like tobacco and alcohol, although at lower rates.³⁸⁴ The attentions of the alternative lifestyle participants now also include issues surrounding genetic engineering of foods, electromagnetic radiation, food irradiation and the protection of biodiversity.

Complementary health practices are being taken up by millions of Australians.³⁸⁵ This both protects the knowledge of non-Western healers and brings the alternative lifestyle class into conflict with international pharmaceutical companies who have a primary motive of profit rather than health.

³⁸⁴ de Launey, Draft Paper, *Use of Cannabis and Other Drugs in Nimbin*, 1997, 11.

³⁸⁵ For example, a 1998 study showed that over half (57%) of all the people in the state of Victoria had used unprescribed alternative medicines in the previous 5 years. "Cellulose Valley Technology Park, Lismore, NSW," *Nimbin News*, August-September 1999, 30.



The Reid's house on the Jarlanbah subdivision.
Photo and story sourced from ABC National Radio: *Earthbeat*, July 1997.

The use of domestic space also embodies alternative values and preferences.³⁸⁶ The common “language” of alternative architecture and décor can be seen when it is given full expression – that is, when the people who are building have enough money to transform their ideas into reality. A home built on the Jarlanbah permaculture hamlet in Nimbin is a good example of this. Like other Nimbin-evolved innovations, it was featured on the ABC’s Radio National, again showing that alternative lifestyle innovations are used as “blue-prints” for wider society.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁶ Crane & Angrosino, *Field Projects in Anthropology*, 1974, 25

³⁸⁷ Photo and story sourced from ABC Radio National: *Earthbeat*.
<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/science/earth/handouts/nimbin.htm>. A three-part documentary for Radio National’s *That’s History* programme celebrated the alternative lifestyle. Radio



The house has been built to a solar-passive design, has a grid-interactive solar system, rainwater collection, wastewater treatment and a highly productive vegetable garden and orchard. Natural oils and pigments were used, and external and internal walls were rendered in local clays. Not surprisingly, given the density of alternative lifestyle settlers, they were not able to source as much demolition material as they had first hoped.

The house's eclectic architecture combines the old world charm of dormer windows and French doors with the rustic appeal of bush pole verandas; a Japanese ceiling is vaulted above a Mediterranean style internal courtyard with a river stone pond and fountain; tropical vines climb towards the ceiling on mudbrick walls and frame huge murals of rainforests with cascading waterfalls. Below the clerestory windows plants trail down into the void from terracotta pots set high on slab shelves; the Lord of the Rings style stonework of the fireplace seems comfortable with the 4

Australia's *Science File*. <http://www.abc.net.au/ra/elp/sincfile/st230797.htm> produced an article on wind power technology.

hand dyed ethnic fabric drapes while the cross braced barn style doors in railway sleeper door jams contrast with sliding doors covered with Japanese paper.

Earthbeat, ABC Radio National Website.³⁸⁸

The owners of this house offer home-stay accommodation, their guests either working for four hours or paying standard rates.³⁸⁹ They get other visitors who arrive for guided tours of the building and its gardens. Again we see the reintegration of income-earning work and lifestyle – the diminution of the separation between private and public spheres of life. This too confirms that *inhabitation* is primarily what the benefit peasantry do on their land.

Of course no matter what efforts the residents of this house make, no matter how far we manage to lower our resource consumption, it will be insignificant in terms of mankind's impact on the environment unless others learn from the example and start to make changes in their own lifestyles. To this extent our primary mission is one of education. [Nigel Reid]

Earthbeat, ABC Radio National Website.³⁹⁰

Perhaps the best way of illustrating how the use of internal domestic space differs for straight and alternative people is to describe how my alternative neighbours transformed a straight house. They moved into the house after its straight landlords vacated it. The first thing they did was to remove the curtains (wide navy blue and white striped Austrian-style blinds with a matching bedspread) from the main bedroom. The curtains were replaced by a couple of pieces of cloth of Indian design. They were loosely held in place by cord, did not completely cover the window, and they were see-through when backlit. This showed that privacy was not a major concern because an access pathway runs alongside their house. The matching blue and white bedspread was replaced by a batik cotton throw. The plain lampshades in the main bedroom were covered by frilled

³⁸⁸ <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/science/earth/handouts/nimbin.htm>.

³⁸⁹ See also TOURISM: Eco-tourism, page 279.

³⁹⁰ <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/science/earth/handouts/nimbin.htm>.

shawls of various designs. Whale and dolphin posters covered the wall, and various bits and pieces of “ethnic” art decorated the room, a hula skirt was pinned to the wall alongside a mask from Bali, a goats’ skull sat on the windowsill among shells and driftwood, and a cut-glass rainbow mobile and crystals were hung in the window.

The use of space outside the house was also contested. The landlords paid for the lawn to be mown and the gardens maintained. This caused friction, as the alternative tenants preferred the “wild garden” look of their lawn as it flowered and seeded, and didn’t like the contractor coming in because he repeatedly mowed over their vegetable garden because it hadn’t been weeded.

The fact that the house was in extremely good condition before they moved in showed that this style of decor has become a preference -- even if those patterns of decoration had evolved from hiding the scabby walls of cheap rental accommodation. Like the house at Jarlanbah, the style incorporates important elements of their culture and aesthetic – featuring decorations that are affordable, natural, handmade, and items from other cultures.

SECTION VI: CLASS POSITION

Introduction to class position

My analysis of the alternative lifestyle community relates their cultural traits to their economic position as a distinctive class. It shows a particular and distinctive form of class-consciousness: a corporate class-consciousness in which these people (now) perceive themselves as constituting a class. They have an ideology that distinguishes them from other classes, and further, they have a *perception* that their ideology does distinguish them (and in particular in relation to straight society).

This section will look at how the alternative lifestyle participants comprise a distinct class group within the rural economy of Nimbin and the surrounding area. They have a different mode of production to the prevailing capitalist economic regime and use their means of production (land and labour power) in a different manner, embodying different relations of production in the process.

A class *in itself* is a group of people who share a common position in the social (economic) structure but do not necessarily actively work together or see themselves as having commonalities. They become a class *for itself* when they begin to act in their own interest as a group (and in the strict Marxist sense) with an understanding of themselves as constituting a class. A class is not a mere collection of individuals, but an active organism that is more than the sum of its parts. As Marx says of the French peasantry:

In this way, the great mass of the French nation is formed by simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes. In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from that of other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, no national bond and no political organisation among them, they do not form a class.

Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1977, Marx & Engels Selected Works Volume 1, 479.

It is not until people recognise a community of (self) interest that they become a class in a sense other than that of a mere aggregation of people with a particular relationship to the means of production. Until that point, they are just a collection of people in the same “category” or social stratum, as Marx said, “much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes.” It is not until they act in their own interests that they form organic links with each other and develop a corporate consciousness, the consciousness of themselves as a group acting in their own interests.

The class *for itself* has only a relative autonomy from the class *in itself* which determines it in the last instance. The object of study when studying a class is not the class *in itself* or the class *for itself* in isolation from each other, but as aspects of a single dialectical unity: a process in which class interests and actions are both *moments* in a historical-materialist continuum and in which interests and actions are constrained by class relationships with other classes.

A class can have a “willed” action without its members individually attuning their wills. The class’s action is the result(ant) of individual actions. A class *for itself* is primarily a relationship, not a set of individuals. A particular person can act in contradiction to their class interests. Hence class *for itself* is also relational (defined by the political relations between classes in struggle) not aggregational (in other words, not just the set of class activist individuals).

In the following chapters I continue to integrate the composite parts of a class analysis of the alternative lifestyle participants in Nimbin. I point out that the alternative lifestyle participants act in their own interests as a class *for itself*, as well as simply sharing a class location. I have identified receipt of benefits, cannabis cropping, inhabitation and eco-activism, and the production of new members of the workforce as providing a common economic base. Adhering to these persons is a dependent (and interrelated) group of persons who get their living from tourism, computing and from research and technology work.

Chapter 13. Class in Itself

13.0 Introduction

This chapter identifies the alternative lifestyle group as a class in its own right, with a unique (if temporary) relationship to the dominant means of production. In this section I conclude that they form the micro-class that I call the benefit peasantry.

The question of the relationship of the alternative lifestyle class to capital is one of the most interesting questions this study will address. Because capital dominates our social formation, once this question is answered, all further analysis of the political activity of the benefit peasantry will become easier.

The rural alternative lifestyle participants can appear to have a contradictory class position or even no shared class position at all, but I demonstrate that classical Marxism provides a suitable theoretical framework with which to analyse this group. Unlike many of the researchers in this field, I look to the group defining processes rather than individual attitudes and behaviours to examine the class position of the alternative lifestyle participants.

The socio-economic basis of the benefit peasantry is production that is not wage labour. The different relations of production that define alternative production, the different ways that alternatives “make a living,” form a cluster. This cluster is what defines the alternatives as a class in itself. Alternative economy articulates with the mainstream capitalist economy through subsidies of various kinds. It was because of the unique conjunction of two primary economic features of their lifestyle, benefit dependence and land-use (directed in the first instance to domestic use) that I called this class of rural alternative lifestyle participants benefit peasants.

13.1 Locating the alternative class

Identifying the class location of the alternative lifestyle participants is central to my thesis. Each of the previous sections has helped build a model of the alternative lifestyle

in order to make their identification as a class possible. This chapter deals with the issues of class, class boundaries, and Marxist theory.

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Marx, *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1977, Marx & Engels Selected Works Volume 1, 108.

If, as Marx claims, the history of all society is the history of class struggles, where is the class struggle that created the alternative lifestyle? The class position of the alternative lifestyle group appears to throw up a challenge to classical Marxist class theory. They report their activity to be driven by ideological rather than economic factors. Their political struggle can be seen as more a moral critique than class struggle in the traditional sense. Further, they exist within a class structure significantly different to the one that Marx analysed. The issue of class composition of modern capitalism has raised considerable debate for sociologists, especially since the emergence of large and powerful single-interest political groups that are sometimes known as mass social movements.

As I said earlier, when you consider a class the question of whether particular individuals are members of a class is not the key question: more important are the social relations that constitute and produce the class because these are the factors that actually define the class. If we were speaking formally about the existence of the working class, the proletariat, we should be applying the label to the process of proletarianisation and the actual *practice* of proletarian wage labour as defining the working class, rather than the persons who make it up.³⁹¹

Classes are defined by the production relations. Class struggles are therefore a consequence of conflicting interests resulting from property relations in antagonistic social formations. So if we want to look for the “alternative” class, we must look for the processes that formed the alternative lifestyle migration to, and settlement of, the region. In other words, we need to identify the particular historical processes defining that class

³⁹¹ See MODELING THE ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLE: Class-Forming Processes, page 71.

at any given time. More than that, those features must be seen to be in opposition to other property relations and social formations existing at the time.

13.2 Benefit Peasants

I propose a new class position for the alternative lifestyle participants, the benefit peasantry. Whether this class persists and what it is likely to do in the case of class struggle will be examined later.³⁹²

I am not seeking to define the alternative lifestyle in strong contrast to any other kinds of peasant, but instead to hint at similarities between peasants (in general) and to provide a description of the *benefit peasantry* in particular. When I speak of peasants I am using a broad definition that includes the notion that these people dwell on the land, they are not farmers, their production is family-focussed, most work is directed at meeting family demands, and only the surplus is sold. Income is sometimes supplemented by production of handcrafts. They have a market position that is vulnerable to takeover by big capitalist farmers. Their lifestyle is somewhat antagonistic to city life. They tend to curtail consumption rather than increase their income.³⁹³

Peasants do not regard their land as a means to make money. They are oriented rather to providing for the [...] consumption of their family ... Peasants run a family, not a business enterprise.

Szymanski, *Class Structure: A Critical Perspective*, 1983, 54.

Politically too, the benefit peasants share commonalities with more “typical” peasants. The rural lifestyle, separated from the mainstream production processes, has implications for the political activity of the alternative lifestyle group. They tend to political engagement on issues dictated to them by their own material interests. This

³⁹² See CLASS POSITION: Likely Class Trajectory, page 474.

³⁹³ See for example, Shanin, *Peasant Societies*, 1971, 13-15; Szymanski, *Class Structure: A Critical Perspective*, 1983, 55; Wolf, *Peasants*, 1966, 16, 57.

doesn't mean they act selfishly but raises the question of what experience and ideology, coupled to a particular mode of production, can compel them to do.

[Peasant protest movements] often centre upon a myth of a social order more just and egalitarian. ... The peasant often idolizes ... figures who stand in open defiance of the social order.

Wolf, *Peasants*, 1966, 106-7.

Many of the accounts in this thesis show the weakness of peasant politics, the fact of their disconnection from supporters and an organised political machine. Individuals are forced to act because of the lack of assemblage and organisation. As individuals, once they do act, they play a significant role in the movement. The emergence of identifiable individual (great) leaders is typical of peasant movements.³⁹⁴ Crowd force is another typical peasant action that we see used by the benefit peasantry.³⁹⁵

The benefit peasantry class that I am proposing is not a class at the level of two-class analysis of the bourgeoisie and proletariat. It is not (a fraction of) one of the basic classes of capitalist society. The relationships that define the benefit peasantry class are secondary to and derived from the bourgeois/proletarian relationship that basically structures capitalist society. I concretely determine the elements that form the benefit peasantry as a class of persons who get their living in the same way.

In so far as ... families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from that of other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class.

Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1977, Marx & Engels Selected Works Volume 1, 479.

The emergence of the benefit peasantry is a reversal of the “normal” migration and work patterns for peasants. They can be viewed as separated from the means of production, in that they tend not to be engaged in wage labour or capitalist production for profit, but

³⁹⁴ See Wolf, *Peasants*, 1966, 107-8.

³⁹⁵ See Shanin, *Peasant Societies*, 1971, 229-237.

rather produce subsistence amounts and sell off any surplus. The income of the benefit peasantry doesn't rely on wages or commodity sales but is partly or wholly derived from state subsidies. These subsidies include benefits, government money and wages for special projects, and from state control of their main cash crop, cannabis.

The economy in Nimbin had thrived on dealing dope—it saved Nimbin. Welfare cheques and harvest time, that was where all the money was coming from. In Nimbin from the [Aquarius] Festival right through to the eighties it wasn't like there was very much tourism or anything, hardly any, it was very much just grass money that kept the town going.

Interview with Micky, October 1997.

Benefit peasants are a class in their own right, with a specific relation to the capitalist social formation, a social role within that formation distinct from that of worker or capitalist. To be a peasant involves, by definition, a rural lifestyle. In order to get an unemployment benefit you have to meet certain requirements, and one of these is (formal) availability to go to work. Taken together, benefit peasants are persons (and their dependents) who live in the countryside and receive a state subsidy. They have a class culture that makes sense of the world for them and enables them to act within the capitalist mode of production in specifically benefit peasant ways.

Under the current benefits entitlement regime, by virtue of the rural existence of benefit peasants, the permanent transition from beneficiary back to worker is unlikely unless they migrate back to the cities, or there is an unprecedented rise in demand for labour in the Nimbin region. Migration back to the cities for the alternative lifestyle participants would involve a change of status from being a benefit peasant to being a worker, perhaps an unemployed one. This status change comes about because someone who lives in the city is available for work in a way that they are not when they are living in Nimbin. As a result the alternative lifestyle participants are not fully part of the capitalist mode of production and not “workers” in the classic sense.³⁹⁶ This means that benefit

³⁹⁶ See MIGRATION: Labour market fluctuations, page 148.

peasants are not factually part of the reserve army of labour, although they are formally so.

Their position parallels the conditions of existence for other, more “traditional” peasants. In the countryside they are peasants, in the cities they are transformed into workers. Their mode of production then changes from a pre-capitalist mode of production surviving within a capitalist structure, to a fully capitalist mode of production.

The capitalist form [of co-operation] ... pre-supposes, from first to last, the free wage labourer, who sells his labour-power to capital. Historically, however, this form is developed in opposition to peasant agriculture and to the carrying on of independent handicrafts.

Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, 1978, 316.

The classification of the alternative lifestyle class as non-workers, suggests that they cannot be put into the proletariat, nor the petit-bourgeoisie. Marx contrasts those who sell their labour-power to capital with peasant agriculture and independent artisans. From this point of view my “benefit peasantry” class designation falls within the orthodox Marxist tradition.

Most of the income of the benefit peasantry as a class comes from benefits, and the regime enforces equalisation of living standards through benefit rules that specify differing rates, justified by beneficiaries’ differing needs and hence based on the costs of reproducing those persons. These rules effect a disproportionately high tax on beneficiaries’ wage income that is much higher than the rate of taxation for the wealthiest citizens. Most benefits are abated (taxed) at 100% once a certain income threshold has been reached. This acts to level the income range of the benefit peasant group as a class, to lessen the amount of internal differentiation.

Even where other income is significant, it is often variable, so that for most weeks the benefit is the main source of income. A benefit peasant may engage in small-scale agricultural production for mainly domestic use and wouldn’t usually sell produce

(although some sell their surplus cannabis crop at prices controlled by the state via policing).

The reason why cannabis growers and the benefit peasants are not two distinct social groups (at the present) is because they share common features of their social existence via a common relationship to their means of production. Both sources of income may accrue to different adults in the same household. Many persons are neither wholly one or the other but a little of both. The benefits smooth income, and for some growers, disguise the source of a portion of their income. This is another sense in which the surplus price of pot is similar to the benefit subsidy – they are both maintained by state action that places an incentive on beneficiaries to lie and cheat. Just as a benefit peasant has to lie about how often their lover comes to stay, the cannabis grower has to lie and pretend that they just live there on nothing, with no visible means of support. Those enforcement-resistance processes are the very same processes and that is why the two forms of income constitute a single social group.

Orthodox position on micro-classes

It is possible to have a local or micro-class, a group who share a unique relationship within the mode of production. Take the Japanese bourgeoisie for example. As well as processes that form them into a bourgeoisie, there are additional processes that form them into a specifically *Japanese* bourgeoisie. These are ethno-cultural processes that effectively mean that Japanese firms invest in other Japanese firms and they form a relatively closed social grouping (social actor).³⁹ At the same time you can see the bourgeoisie as forming a single international class, “the capitalist class,” in which it is constituted by the capitalist production relationships that are effectively worldwide.

In the Marxist theory of classes, the two-class model of bourgeoisie and proletariat that was used in the analysis of the fundamental capitalist relationship contrasts with the

³⁹ We can identify the comparadore capitalists in Latin America, and the so-called “Brown Table” Māori bourgeoisie in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

more detailed model which was used by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.³⁹⁸ In *The Eighteenth Brumaire* Marx sometimes describes commercial capital and industrial capital as distinct classes and at other times as fragments of a single bourgeois class. In this we can see Marx showing the distinction between classes in detail and the fundamental two-class relationship.

The bourgeois-proletarian class division in modern capitalism is fundamental because it is defined by the mode of production that dominates the social formation. This has not always been the case. In revolutionary France, for example, this division existed (because capitalist production existed) but the *fundamental* two-class division at the time was between the feudal landowners and the whole “third estate” as a “class” of feudal society.³⁹⁹

The fact that Marxism has a two-class model (basically a model of the fundamental composition of capitalism) doesn’t mean that it can’t also have a multi-class model. They don’t necessarily contradict each other; it is just the level of detail of the analysis that differs. It’s a case of what kind of contradiction you are examining. If you want to examine the basic class conflict that makes our society riven with conflict, then you look at the two-class bourgeois-proletarian conflict. Conflicts within the bourgeoisie or within the proletariat are ignored and the actions of classes outside the two main classes (like the petit-bourgeoisie) are also ignored at that level of analysis.

A more detailed analysis of concrete political struggles of different classes requires a more detailed view, looking at smaller groups of persons who share a common relationship to the means of production and defining that relationship more closely. Such an analysis distinguishes between class fractions and treats them as distinct classes as

³⁹⁸ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1977, Marx & Engels Selected Works, Volume 1.

³⁹⁹ The classes of feudal society were the lords temporal, the lords spiritual and (the third estate) the commoners. See Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, Oxford University Press, 1978.

Marx did in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. Sometimes he spoke of the bourgeoisie as a single political actor, in which case he'd speak of the "Party of Order," the political representative of the commercial and financial bourgeoisie taken together as one. When he wanted to speak of the conflicts between them he'd speak of them as two distinct classes – the commercial bourgeoisie and the financial bourgeoisie with their political representatives as the Bourbon and Orleanist parties (factions).

Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in the historically determined system of social production, by their relation ... to the means of production, by their role in the social organisation of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it. Classes are groups of people one of which can appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy.

Lenin, *A Great Beginning*, 1965, Collected Works Volume 29, 421.

This quote from Lenin highlights the orthodoxy of the approach that I take to class in the main body of my thesis. Lenin saw classes as more than the simple owners and non-owners of the means of production, and understood that ownership itself turns out to be a complex category.

The community (the national bond, the political organisation) that the identity of their interests begets is seen as also determining the class as a social actor. The identity of interests among members of a class does not mechanistically produce the "organism." It is an environment in which the class as an actor, a social entity, operates.

Cannabis growers are also beneficiaries

Extending the analysis begun earlier, a person who works at growing cannabis can also be seen as a beneficiary of the state, odd as this might appear.⁴⁰⁰ The state subsidises their agricultural production by maintaining a minimum price through prohibition. It's

⁴⁰⁰ This price regulation activity by the state was fully argued in *PRODUCTION RELATIONS: Cannabis Cropping*, page 228.

like a legal monopoly that the state grants the benefit peasants by differentially repressing their competitors. Hence, the people who grow and sell cannabis derive benefits from the higher price and what the police do is enforce those prices. Enforcement of the cannabis prohibition tends to be better in the city and so the risk is higher. So “low enforcement” is a “natural advantage” of Nimbin in the cannabis trade. Both of those forms of rent are obtained by individuals but on property that is owned collectively. The benefit peasants and the cannabis growers themselves all derive money individually from this collective property. The collective property they have – which you could see as the drug regime plus the benefit laws – is something that actually binds them together as a group. They have a collective interest, as a class, in maintaining this property.

Cannabis is highly tradable, limiting the price difference between Nimbin and say, Brisbane or Sydney. There is a single market for cannabis, so cannabis produced in Nimbin can find its way to Sydney where the mark-up is not enough to separate the two places into two distinct markets. The lower price of production in Nimbin means that, despite the greater distance from its market, Nimbin cannabis can compete with Sydney cannabis. The lower price of production in Nimbin therefore allows the Nimbin growers to extract a rent in the form of surplus profit.

As I argued earlier, Nimbin growers receive differential rent. The market price of cannabis has to pay for its production in the worst conditions (required to meet demand), therefore cannabis grown in optimal conditions attracts differential rent. The cost savings for Nimbin growers are appropriated by the benefit peasantry. This price/cost ratio advantage of Nimbin would plummet if members of the National Farmers Federation grew cannabis in Queensland on behalf of multinational cigarette manufacturers. Nimbin’s status as a profitable place to grow cannabis is not determined primarily by natural but by cultural factors. The cannabis laws have given the alternative lifestyle participants a rent-bearing property that is socially owned.

The people who grow small amounts of cannabis for sale can also be usefully compared to the traditional peasants. If and when the necessary conditions for appropriation of this “industry” are met (that is, the full legalisation of cannabis) then the peasant “farmer”

will be squeezed out of the production and sale of cannabis by bourgeois interests in the form of agribusiness capital. Cannabis can be grown on a huge scale (and indeed has been in the past) as a mono-crop and all the economies of scale and mechanisation of the business will easily out-strip the ability of the benefit peasant to compete in the production of an economically competitive crop. The fate of the cannabis growing industry around Nimbin would follow the core-periphery trajectory of banana cropping and the dairy industry.

Adherence to the benefit peasantry

What about other persons who come to live in Nimbin who are neither farmers nor beneficiaries nor peasants? I think that, to a greater or lesser degree, the alternative lifestyle imposes certain ways of behaving and even thinking upon them too. The ways of life of some persons who are neither peasants nor beneficiaries are still conditioned by the existence of that class group by inter-dependencies of different types and different levels. This can lead to an “ideological” adherence to the class.

Teachers at the local school, for example, must be sensitive to the particular educational priorities and styles that are demanded by the wider ethnic populace in Nimbin. Without the existence of that group, they would not have work there. They must feel comfortable or they would transfer out of the area. In that sense they have self-selected to become part of the benefit peasantry. The conditions of that class’s existence and their relationship to it, determines, to a greater or lesser extent, their own lifestyle without their having to be strictly a member of the class *in itself*.

In this way, local CentreLink office workers, teachers, health and community workers can also adhere to the benefit peasantry as a class (to a greater or lesser degree). This is because their relationship to the means of production (their wage) is mediated through this class group: without the presence of the benefit peasantry class in the area, their own presence as workers in those particular jobs would not be required.

The dole was an important contributor to this [re-settlement process] and it has acted, and continues to act, as a kind of grass roots rural subsidy, providing sustenance to people who spend locally in village businesses, which spend in the

bigger centres and so on. Social Security payments continue to be a major economic contributor to the region – total Social Security payments to the northern rivers region is \$468 million pa – \$6.5 million (of which the dole accounts for \$1.9 million) fortnightly goes through the Lismore DSS office alone (Jan 1991 figures.)

Dunstan, *Images From the Edge*, Position Paper, 1994, 5.

Also the criminal relationship with the legal system for marijuana farming under cannabis prohibition provides surplus cash income that is spent by locals and helps keep the local economy afloat, contributing to the viability of the tourism and retail sectors. As people were reminded at a public meeting against drugs in Nimbin, “the street scene is what brings tourists to Nimbin, and a lot of business people in this town rely on tourists for their income.”⁴⁰¹

It is in this way that persons who are not benefit peasants themselves have their life conditioned by that class and become part of it. By supporting the class actions of the benefit peasantry too, they can become a part of the alternative movement, the class *for itself*, without having to become a part of the class *in itself* (in the same way Karl Marx could be seen as part of the working class movement without being working class himself).

13.3 Benefit entitlement, migration, rent & citizenship

The benefit peasant is entitled to the benefit acquired by the reserve army of labour by virtue of citizenship: it is a patrilial right. Benefits can therefore be seen as rent on collective property. Historically, this is not out of the ordinary. The Roman proletariat got the “corn dole” and “circuses” because they were citizens: they were paid “benefits” from the revenue of the Empire. These peasants were Roman citizens expelled from the country (and their former farming occupations) by the investment of the surpluses of the

⁴⁰¹ *Nearly Normal Nimbin: Sects, Drugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll*. See also TOURISM: Tourism distorts economy, page 261.

empire (in the form of money and slaves) by the Roman ruling class, during the creation of latifundia (slave-based, large-scale farms).⁴⁰²

When a benefit peasant receives a benefit from the state, it is a rent on a piece of collective property. The citizen-right that a beneficiary has entitles them to their benefit by law. Their entitlement is a form of property they have that entitles them to a money income sufficient for a bare subsistence living.⁴⁰³ In 1998 this collective right entitled them to \$354.60 a fortnight, and it was a very valuable piece of property.⁴⁰⁴ This right comes with medical and educational rights (also potentially worth tens of thousands of dollars) and the right to vote.

It's a right to a rent that they have in the form of collective property – the entitlement they have to a benefit is not something they own as individuals. They own their right to a benefit not by virtue of being the individual that they are, but by virtue of being a member of a class of persons – a set of persons or beneficiaries – who have a particular entitlement in common. Every beneficiary has the same entitlement to that benefit as any other.

The key feature with internal migration of Australian nationals is that they can't be repatriated: they have to be supported by the economy. However, Australian cities have no ability to "tighten immigration conditions" on their own citizens, in contrast with the controls available to exclude unneeded "peripheral" workers wanting to migrate to "core" areas, or expel them when they are no longer required.

⁴⁰² See *The Oxford History of the Classical World*, 1993, 426; Korovkin, *History of the Ancient World*, 1985, 227.

⁴⁰³ There is no question about the fact of citizenship as property, and that is made clear by the recent trend to trade that property – i.e. for Asians to purchase New Zealand or Australian citizenship and cash-in their middle class status in Asia for citizenship.

⁴⁰⁴ Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, *Customers: A Statistical Overview*, 1998, 93. The extension in 1999 of the stand-down period for New Zealanders moving to Australia represents the expropriation of their collective property.

This is not to say that the settlement of the alternative lifestyle population in the Nimbin region is a conscious government policy or a “plot” by capitalist forces. It is the result of the objective logic of a citizenship relationship with the State and the favourable economic conditions for land acquisition. This is where the processes of “self-selection” for the alternative migration come into play.

In this respect, you could see the migration of “alternative seekers” as a structural response by some people to the problem of unemployment.⁴⁰⁵ Long-term unemployed are cheaper to support in Nimbin than in Sydney, and government policies devised to drive them back to the cities would be costly and counter-productive when there is a sufficiently large labour surplus already resident in the urban areas. Many alternative lifestyle participants are responsive to short-term employment needs and are willing to work for short periods in the city. It is cheaper to sustain these people locally than to import migrants and train them, which has proven to be expensive.

If work-for-the-dole became the norm, the status of the benefit peasants would also change. This is because work for the dole is a form of enserfment. It would represent a class transition in which those persons no longer derive rent from the communal property but instead become part-time serfs. They derive rent from this piece of property (citizenship), but they would have to pay labour rent as well in order to obtain the right to income from this property. Resistance to this would also take the form of an intensified struggle to control “community organisations” that would be the “employers” of this forced labour.

13.4 Class transitions

Land ownership coupled with education gives many of these people the means to transfer to another class by using that land for high-tech, intensive agriculture. Those who own or lease productive land have got the option of class migration into the petit

⁴⁰⁵ Other Australian nationals in their situation might choose to migrate to another country with a buoyant economy for work.

bourgeoisie via farming. They can develop into croppers and produce high-value crops of other kinds. An example would be herb farming rather than traditional cattle farming. The upsurge in interest in rural land and lifestyle blocks also means that the land owned by alternative lifestyle participants is now often a great deal more valuable than when they bought it. The increased importance of tourism in Nimbin has also increased the level of internal income differentiation within the benefit peasantry.

The high level of education gives some people the opportunity for class mobility (sometimes via further education) into professional jobs such as teaching or social work into the traditional white-collar middle class strata. This is also a class migration. Working in the city part of the time remains an option for some (especially professionally trained alternatives) and people talk about having “the best of both worlds,” both an urban and a rural lifestyle.

Although I do spend several days per week working, often with hand tools, on the land like a peasant, I also put in two or three days in a modern, air-conditioned university building. I commute from one life to the other in a Holden station wagon, and often fly interstate or overseas to attend meetings related to my agricultural interests. Despite increasingly frequent feelings of being overloaded, I feel I may have inadvertently stumbled onto the best of both worlds. [Leigh Davison]

Mercalf, *From Utopian Dreaming to Communal Reality*, 1995, 54.

The benefit peasant class boundary also interfaces with traditional lumpen-proletarian activities, like prostitution and crime, theft, burglary and the like. Often these class transitions, too, will involve migration out of the area. If they had stayed in the city they would be unemployed workers or lumpen-proletarians. Migration transformed them into a distinct class of “benefit peasants.” They became (in capitalist terms) *non*-workers, rather than members of a class of unemployed workers, after migration.

This begs the question, what would happen in a situation of full employment? Fulltime work definitely changes the relationships within the alternative lifestyle community. High demand for labour could draw them into the proletariat by rural to urban migration, or by job creation in the Northern Rivers. This would involve a class transition because a truly buoyant labour market in Northern Rivers would draw them

into the working class as a distinctive social stratum within it. Work-for-the-dole schemes would also link some benefit peasants (by virtue of the organisation arising from assemblage) to the working class.

Inter-generational transfer of class position

Anecdotal information suggests that the movement largely survives by recruitment of adult members rather than by “growing their own.” The reason why many of the children of alternative lifestyle participants tend not to remain in the Nimbin area is because the class-forming processes that moved their parents to that area do not necessarily apply to them. The chances of being an alternative lifestyle participant are hereditary – like your chances of being a doctor – and like your chances of being a doctor, it is an attenuated form of your parents’ decision. That makes it more likely that the children of alternatives will also be alternative, but that outcome is not certain and they will not necessarily be alternative in the same way.

Case histories show that they are likely to move from being rural alternatives (benefit peasants) to *urban alternatives* (workers). When it comes to their own class trajectory they’re subject to many of the class-forming pressures of other people in rural areas, which involve out-migration to the cities to join the urban proletariat.

While I originally thought that the children of the original migrants had not been socialised into capitalist production relations, I now believe that they will be absorbed into the mainstream labour force if they migrate to the cities. At that point their status would change from alternative lifestyle participant to “worker.” Benefit peasants (like their more traditional counterparts) are not typically part of the reserve army of labour until they move to the city. After all, not being socialised into the capitalist mode of production has not prevented other migrants being recruited into the labour force, and alternatives generally have a high level of social capital in the form of education, self esteem, social adroitness and “savvy” with authorities. Importantly, alternative children are pre-socialised for urbanisation in ways that other rural kids are not.

Class diversity

In conversation, local people suggest that around a quarter of the present population consists of the traditional farming families, and another quarter or so are clearly more radical-type alternative lifestyle participants. The fifty percent in the middle have varying degrees of inclusion and exclusion – sharing some features of the alternative culture but not others. People believe that the more recent migrations introduced an “intermediate stratum” to the occupational and class diversity of the area.

The belief that an intermediate stratum has arrived suggests fissions within the alternative community. This is true in the sense that the alternatives are not all alike and have varying degrees of commitment to a nebulous ideal of what an alternative utopia might be. It is not true, however, in another, more basic (Marxist) sense: old and new arrivals have material circumstances in common. While the newer arrivals are not the same as the original communitarian settlers, from a materialist point of view their *relationship* to the dominant mode of production is just as alternative as those first alternative settlers.

The growing market in the provision of various kinds of tourism services, personal growth therapies, spiritual retreats and so on introduced a petit-bourgeois element into the alternative lifestyle which threatened to make the alternative lifestyle community a “two class” community by the mid-1980s,

In Nimbin there's definitely a middle-class influence happening ... different people coming and also different attitudes as they grow older. A lot of those freaks were professional people and were from those sort of backgrounds, their radicalism or whatever has worn a bit thin, they've got kids, their land is worth more money, etc ...

Interview with Micky, October 1997.

As I said earlier, the fracture of the alternative lifestyle group into two classes hasn't happened. I think that this is because the conditions of existence of all the alternative lifestyle participants are (for the moment) still strongly conditioned by those of the benefit peasantry.

The alternative culture has developed a life of its own, sustained by a core group. Just as the fact that not all Cubans are communists doesn't stop Cuba being a communist country, not all alternatives need subscribe to the ideals for their lifestyle for them to be "alternative" while they live in Nimbin.

Chapter 14. Class for Itself

14.0 Introduction

This chapter looks at the political activity of alternative lifestyle participants – the benefit peasants – when they are acting in their own class interests as a class *for itself*.

In earlier chapters I have argued that they engage primarily in domestic production, and it is there that we find they are most active in defence of their class. To see this you must take into account custodianship of the land, the production of children, and the cropping and distribution of cannabis as being their work (what they do) and look for how their common interests (deriving from their class position) unite them as a class *in itself*.

The corporate consciousness their common relationship to the mode of production gives rise to is expressed in class actions such as defending their right to benefits, in their demands for control of their village, in health and ecological campaigns, in the action to decriminalise cannabis, and in the agitation for changes to land-use regulations.

I look at the growing involvement of the benefit peasants in formal politics (local, state and federal politics) and it is here that we can see they form a powerful political bloc in the local area.

First, though, I will review their political inheritance.

14.1 Political history: moral critique

Contemporary moral criticism is a product of capitalism and it is the contradictions of capitalism that make moral criticism the kind of criticism it is. This is because capitalism generates ideals that can only be satisfied with the transcendence of capitalism, ideals such as liberty, equality, fraternity and democracy. Moral critics point to the failure of capitalism to meet the ideals that it claims to embody.

Conservationists, peaceniks and other moral critics arise from the oppressive situations indirectly derived from the central contradiction of the capitalist mode of production (i.e. the contradiction between capital and labour, which directly generates the working-class struggle.) The realisation of the goals of engendered protest groups will challenge capitalism, because engendered groups are products of the contradictions within the capitalist mode of production. This is because although these groups do not address the *central* class conflict of capitalist society, the contradictions that generate them are inevitable products of capitalism.

The existence of an alternative lifestyle movement itself can be seen as a counter-reaction to the excesses of capitalism and a moral rather than a revolutionary critique of capitalism. The alternative lifestyle participants are strongly anti-materialist but not strongly anti-capitalist, because they depend on capitalism for their very existence. This explains why alternative lifestyles arise in countries where the worst excesses of capitalism are ameliorated by the welfare state and not in the countries where the harshest exploitation takes place.⁴⁰⁶ Despite this dependence, the alternative lifestyle offers a powerful critique on the excesses of capitalism that cannot be dismissed simply because it is not in itself revolutionary.

Many of the early alternative lifestyle participants could be considered liberal moral aesthetes. Finding no place for themselves within the perceived ugliness and rigidity of capitalism, yet a product of it, they became *counter-cultural*. Being liberals, they had an over-riding concern with the “fulfilment of the individual,” and had no class tools with which to examine capitalism or to offer possibilities for fundamental social (class) change. Instead they attempted to change the cultural basis of society and fought for individual freedoms.

Some commentators argue that the widespread availability of tertiary education in the 1960s and 70s provided an environment in which conditions for a cultural revolution could develop. The “extended adolescence” offered by student life made tertiary

⁴⁰⁶ Pakulski, *Social Movements: The Politics of Moral Protest*, 1991, xvi.

institutions into “hot-beds” of radical ideas. The key point is that these students were organised intrinsically by their assemblage and came into daily contact with each other and shared common experiences. There was a concentration (critical mass) of young people exposed to new ideas and having the social capital to exploit those ideas – the communication skills, the confidence and education – at a particular moment in the history of Western capitalism. The early radicalism of the urban hippies and students was largely played out with opposition to conscription and the Vietnam War, and to the demand for increased personal freedom and a new morality.

A generation was in revolt – against the [Vietnam] war, their parents, the system, the suburbs The universities ... became centres of dissent. ... Student newspapers, bristling with radical articles and defiantly sexual language, were seized by grim-faced police. ...

A generation seemed to be casting aside the values of security, the home, decency, hygiene, sexual morality and respect. For every ageing conservative who abused the communities and the radicals and the filthy long-haired hippies, there was a young man who imagined himself forced to napalm a Vietnamese village and knew that it was wrong.

Manning Clark, *History of Australia*, 1996, 650-1. [Coda: Michael Cathcart.]

The election slogan of the Australian Labor Party in the 1970s, *It's Time For a Change*, resonated with this group who were struggling to escape the shackles of 1950s consumerism and morality. The life-experience of these people resulted in the liberal and individualist focus on freedom from compulsion, a critique of education and on relationships. It shows in their concerns at the time, in the material they produced and in outcomes in the sense of what they did next – for example, their political alienation, dropping out of mainstream society, the back to the land movement, an emphasis on interpersonal relationships and a concern with process over outcome.

Their activism didn't extend to taking on the class structure. A lack of connection to the working class and to working class interests, has meant that their politics is distinctive, and could be seen as a kind of anarchistic liberalism. Liberal, in the sense I use the term, does not simply mean open-minded or tolerant, but refers to the bourgeois emphasis on

personal autonomy.⁴⁰⁷ The bourgeoisie present the notion that we are all free despite the fact that the majority of us have to be proletarians (in the sense that we have to work to live). This notion of freedom is part of the hegemonic ideology in which bourgeois interests and norms constitute “normality,” the accepted reality for the whole of society.

Political activity arising from liberalism is typically reformist in nature. Liberalism seeks to achieve legal change, to ensure each individual an equal opportunity to “succeed,” to succeed within the given mode of production. Liberal movements of various kinds tend to flourish when the economy of rich “Western” capitalist countries is buoyant, and reforms are feasible within the capitalist framework and are even necessary for capital. Liberal movements suffer setbacks during the cyclic economic depressions.

A social revolution

Urban hippies and students were not “workers,” they were not connected to the workers’ movement and had little *organised* class-consciousness. They were marginal to work and became (at least temporarily) lumpen-proletarians rather than proletarians. The concerns of the working class at the time were less significant than their own “experiential” lives and they believed themselves to be the “revolutionary elite.” Keith Melville and Peter Cock were among those who believed that an elite group would be the vanguard of a social revolution and they argued that the working class had sold out to the capitalist system. In this they echoed the ideas of the Frankfurt School theorists.

Thus we need to begin with economically secure and move towards the economically insecure. This also involves beginning with the educated, particularly those educated in the humanities and the human sciences, and moving towards the uneducated. ...

⁴⁰⁷ I use liberal in the sense that Zillah Eisenstein outlines: “Liberal ideas are the specific set of ideas that developed with the bourgeois revolution, asserting the importance and autonomy of the individual. These ideas, which originated in seventeenth-century England and took root in the eighteenth century, are now the dominant political ideology of twentieth-century Western society.” Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*, 1981, 425.

To my mind the working class is the new reactionary class. The workers are too caught up in their efforts to possess and consume the materialistic outpourings of the corporate state to want to change the order of things radically. [Peter Cock.]

Smith & Crossley (Editors), *The Way Out: Radical Alternatives in Australia*, 1975, 11-12.

Cut in on the profits, the working class is docile and content, and confrontations between hard-hats and long-hairs are only the most recent evidence that labourers have become the staunch defenders of the status quo.

Melville, *Communes in the Counter Culture*, 1972, 13.

Revolutionary changes in society are the consequence of a contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production. The relations of production had become inappropriate to modern capitalist production. The rapid social change of the time meant that there were very few jobs “for life” any more. People were required to be more flexible in their work situation, to be more mobile, to change jobs more often, and so on. Ideologies that supported the old social structures had become outdated, a fetter on development. This put pressure on family structures to change and, naturally, it was the young, who had the least invested in the old way and could see more to gain from the new, who embraced the change.

It follows, therefore, that when the form of production changed – for example from feudalism to capitalism – the institutions and ideas also changed. What was moral at one stage could become immoral at another, and vice versa. And naturally at the time when the material change was taking place – the change in the form of production – there was always a conflict of ideas, a challenge to existing institutions.

Burns, *Introduction to Marxism*, 1983, 13.

Many alternative lifestyle participants would argue that the conditions they faced under “straight” society were unendurable and that by “dropping out” they escaped the excesses of modern capitalism and its stultifying absence of personal freedoms. The catch-cries, “resist authority,” and “the personal is political,” validated people’s individual experiences. People were seeking new ways of relating to each other, to replace the more authoritarian traditional style with a flexible lifestyle and family structure. The emphasis was on more “human” social interactions rather than the

“instrumental” exchanges that were seen to be the consequence of capitalist relations of production.

Altman (1979: 119) states, “the alternative culture ... proposes new attitudes toward work, authority, sexuality and sex roles, material goods, and organization; it rejects the narrow confines within which traditional politics are played out”.

Metcalf, *Dropping Out and Staying In*, 1986, 394.

You can locate the “counter-culture” in the “economic” of this period relatively easily. That’s not to say that the influence was one way, just that the political and economic conditions were ripe for an ideological change. The big picture includes an analysis of the economic conditions of the time that engendered the modern alternative lifestyle movement. The outcomes of this struggle – what was possible – were both permitted and limited by the economic situation.

Around the time that Nimbin was settled by the first wave of alternative lifestyle colonists unemployment in Australia was at a minimum. The fact that work was easy to find is shown in the power (freedom) of workers to leave jobs (or even be fired) and find new ones without an extended period of involuntary unemployment.

In those days I worked in coffee bars, in those days you could work for a month, a couple of months or something, and then just take your last pay and piss off, just not go in one day. [You could] fuck off, and go to an arts festival or something, and then the day you come back and look in the paper on Monday and decide which job you wanted, basically, and go for it. They’d say, “When do you want to start?” and you’d say, “Wednesday,” and they’d say, “Oh, all right.” You’d get the job, you know. There were hundreds of them.

Interview with Andy, October 1995.

So we instantly got on the dole, which was easy, incredibly easy actually. Just walk in, put your moniker down, and you were away laughing.

Interview with Alex, October 1995.

The buoyancy of the economy was also shown by the ease with which those people who were unemployed were able to get the dole. In other words, “dropping out” was an economically viable option. Unemployment was not yet a national problem and there

was no organised backlash against the alternative movement. As the employment situation changed and Australia entered into an economic recession the unemployment benefit became harder to get and harder to retain.

The alternative lifestyle movement is by and large a moral movement in that it does not plan to radically change the economic (capitalist) structure of society through action but suggests that each person should make a morally responsible choice about how they live. The slogan *Think Globally – Act Locally* showed people a way in which they could enact that philosophy. This political perspective is a consequence of their relationship to the mode of production. Twenty-five years on many of these same ideas have been renamed “new social movements” and “mass social movements” but their theorists have still largely failed to locate the economic class impetus that drives them.

14.2 Benefit Peasants and class action

Class organisation requires co-operation, and co-operation, according to Marx, requires assemblage. The working class is organised into collectives by the capitalist. The workers are a class not only because they share common conditions of existence, but also because they are united in the course of their daily life in capitalist production into groups that can then become politically active and begin to organise.

As a general rule, labourers cannot co-operate without being brought together: their assemblage in one place is a necessary condition of their co-operation.

Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, 1978, 312.

From a purely mechanistic point of view, you could argue the benefit peasantry are separate and un-organised individual peasants rather in the manner that Marx described the French peasants: that they constitute a class only in the sense that they share the same conditions but which don't actually form an organised structure. The benefit peasantry, were not organised into work collectives by the imperatives of capitalist organisation. They did not come into daily contact with others in order to earn a living and consequently, although they shared the same conditions of existence, they didn't have a natural organic form of organisation arising from daily work associations.

It is when they began to act in their own class interests that their shared mode of living united them into a new organism, that of a class *for itself*, with an innate structure that can lead to political organisation and activism. Until then the benefit peasantry were not a class: they were just a set of individuals.

As Greta Seed points out in the following quote, group cohesiveness arose when an external force challenged the group. The early environmental fights over logging Terania Creek, then over building permits and standards and the number of dwellings, were instrumental in creating a corporate awareness among the alternative settlers.

[I]t was really very quite nice of them to give us an outside threat to pull us together, which is always really great for a group of people to have something to fight. [Greta Seed.]

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

It is no surprise that the most politically active faction of the alternative movement within local body politics are the people who live on intentional communities. This is in contrast to the rest of the benefit peasantry who lack the intrinsic level of organisation that is engendered by regular assemblage at work. For those people who live communally, their common interests and their daily interaction means that political organisation will generate political action, particularly when their interests were threatened. Their communities also gave them the internal structures to allow this.

Flexibility in the organisation of other commitments of daily life, such as paid work and child-care, can enable community members to structure their time to accommodate political demands.

Tilden, *Women in Intentional Communities*, 1991, 329.

For the entire period of the existence of the alternative lifestyle communities in this area powerful enemies in local government have been working against them. It has been necessary to organise and to represent the interests of the Multiple Occupancy residents and the general interests of the benefit peasantry as a class.

14.3 What it compels them to do

Ideology can constrain action. If you believe the world is flat and you could fall off the edge of it [ideology] then you will move around the earth in particular ways, sticking to the “known” [action]. Even if you don’t suffer the real indignity of actually falling off the edge, the belief that you might do so would seriously limit your explorations of the earth. The alternative ideology impacts upon political activity of this class by suggesting to them what they should do. Putting it another way, their ideology shows to them what are soluble problems, and suggests ways to solve them.

Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve, since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.

Marx, *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1977, Marx & Engels Selected Works Volume 1, 504.

For example, the alternative lifestyle ideology proposes solutions like growing hemp on intentional community land to solve unemployment and drug abuse problems and at the same time protect the environment.⁴⁰⁸ Others suggest organic vegetable growing as an employment-generating venture for people with disabilities.⁴⁰⁹ Core-periphery issues are addressed through micro-credit schemes.⁴¹⁰

The work they do is basically autonomous small-scale local rural production. This means that the political organisation that has occurred revolves around features of their habitation in that area: ecology, zoning regulations, benefit entitlement, cannabis law reform and personal freedoms.

⁴⁰⁸ See the Star Earth Tribe proposals, *Nimbin News*, February–March 1997, 11; and *Nimbin News*, October–November 1997, 15.

⁴⁰⁹ “Lismore’s Own City Farm,” *Nimbin News*, June–July 1996, 24.

⁴¹⁰ “Microcredit – A World Saver,” *Nimbin News*, February–March, 1997, 21.

The local concentration of benefit peasants gives rise to an ideology that articulates several elements of their lifestyle and has distinctive features of opposition to the state apparatus.

First, the humiliating dependence that beneficiaries have on the state entails, by defence, a tradition of hiding things from the authorities.⁴¹¹ Second, the use of illegal drugs built a tradition of secrecy and disregard of the law. Together, they conspire to give this class a distinctive political orientation.

It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation as well as in the whole organisation of bourgeois society today.

Marx & Engels, *The Holy Family*, 1975, 47.

The ideology of the Aquarian settlers favoured small-scale activity, a degree of social and cultural withdrawal from the mainstream (and a critique of it), responsibility for self and ones' actions. They believed they were creating a "blue print" for sustainable living, a "revolution by lifestyle."

One great attraction that draws people to a place like Nimbin is the promise of a community in which one is an active participant, rather than merely a consumer/observer. In keeping with the spirit of Aquarius, which seeks to empower the individual to take responsibility for our local and global situation, Nimbin is a town with many small, ethical organisations working with co-operative principles for the good of local people and/or the environment.

⁴¹¹ The authorities can pry into the private lives of beneficiaries. Sometimes they used to visit sole parent beneficiaries to check for the existence of another set of adult clothing, spare toothbrushes, contraceptives, toilet seat left up, shaving gear, and so on, all supposedly proof that the beneficiary might not be entitled to support from the state.

These groups are the initiatives of ordinary community residents with strong commitments to the services the groups provide, rather than the wage-slave mentality common to “workforce” jobs.

Nimbin & Environs, No. 2, 27.

Different organisations sprang into life to meet the challenges of the time. The Home Builders Association was established in 1977, the Rural Resettlement Task Force in 1983, and the Pan Community Council (an organisation that represents the interests of the Multiple Occupancy communities to outside agencies like the Lismore City Council and the state government) was established in 1987.⁴¹² These are all examples of political engagement with the mainstream as the benefit peasantry acted as a class for itself.

The political activity of the benefit peasantry as a class *for itself* is embodied in their entire lifestyle. The alternative lifestyle culture is a lived critique of the mainstream society and an enactment of the idea that “the personal is political.” For these reasons, their political activity is not apart from their everyday life: what they do and how they conduct their lives is part of their political activity. All aspects of their lifestyle – domestic practices and work and ideology – are *conscious* political activities and there is little separation between the public and private spheres of life.

We moved from disparateness to being “in the spirit” in a transition which was subtle, pervasive and surprisingly quick. The process began in 1974 and within 12 months the resettler culture had entered its first golden era with a covey of volunteer community service organisations established and flourishing – the Nimbin Community School (a parent-teacher primary school alternative to the state system), Birth and Beyond (the homebirthing support unit and pre and post natal service), The Rainbow Region Homebuilders Association (the advocacy group for communal rezoning), the Nimbin Folk Club (the weekly exposition of local song writing and musical talent), the Nimbin News (a weekly mimeographed newsletter, organ of the Nimbin resettlers) and the Bush Factory (the old butter factory brought to new life as a strata titled enterprise centre which now houses the Bush Theatre, Mulgum Café, Bush Traks, Nimbin Candleworks and various artist studios).

Dunstan, *Images From the Edge*, Position Paper, 1994, 2.

⁴¹² See CLASS FOR ITSELF: Issues of Inhabitation, page 437.

The Hemp Embassy in Nimbin is a political group that acts on behalf of the benefit peasantry class over one of their primary products. The Environment Centre was opened in 1990 and acts as a focus and organising centre for their environmental activity. The Neighbourhood and Information Centre is an organisation that helps people with their relationship with various state agencies, providing youth services, advocacy, referrals to government agencies, supervision of community service workers and family support workers.⁴¹³ The Community Centre, opened in 1998, will take its own place as a political force in terms of community development and has already had to fight a series of important battles to get established at all.⁴¹⁴ The Rainbow Power Company is at the same time a workplace, an expression of alternative ideology and part of a wider green political movement.

14.3.1 Defending right to benefits

The stagnation of rural areas and urban youth unemployment were issues in Australia in the early 1980s. By then the right wing, under Malcolm Fraser, had begun to make unemployment benefits harder to get. The criteria were strengthened and enforced, and the state agencies (the Department of Social Security and the Department of Labor) would use all kinds of ploys to disallow benefit applications.⁴¹⁵

An early and very successful tactic used to discourage settlement in the early days was to offer beneficiaries jobs at the Mount Isa mines. If they took the job they'd be working and wouldn't need the dole, and if they refused the job it was proof they "didn't want to work" and they would be cut off.⁴¹⁶ Eventually the alternatives acted as a class, and in a media-grabbing action they marched to the Department of Social Security offices. This class agency resulted in concessions from their "employer," the state.

⁴¹³ *Nimbin & Environs*, No. 2, 1993, 33.

⁴¹⁴ See *CLASS FOR ITSELF: The Struggle for the Community Centre*, page 442.

⁴¹⁵ See "Been Cut-off Lately?" *Nimbin News*, February–March 1987, 7.

⁴¹⁶ *Nearly Normal Nimbin: Peace, Love and Burnt Rice*.

The majority were low income earners and unemployed but the Department of Social Security in Lismore *refused* benefits to many on the grounds that they were not properly dressed! They assumed that the applicants did not want to work, neither would they get a job in any case, owing to their dress code.

By 1975 some had not received benefits for 12 months and a meeting was called which convened a protest march from Spinks Park to the Social Security in Molesworth Street. It was successful. (*Northern Star*, Nov '75.)

Unfortunately this willingness to accept the dole was also seen by old locals as an *unwillingness* to work!

Most 'hippies' however, felt they *were* working very hard to provide homes and live a sustainable lifestyle. In fact, surviving on low income, poor housing and no electricity, took huge amounts of time and energy.

"Reflections of Women on Tuntable Falls," *Nimbin News*, August-September 1998, 4.

This quote ties together several important threads. First, it shows the effect of ethnically distinct style of clothing as a political statement with economic consequences. Second, it shows that the alternative definition of "work" includes work done for the household, and third, it points to the difficulty of that work in the absence of labour-saving domestic technologies. Fourth, we can see a different political attitude to benefit entitlement (a reformulation of mainstream ideology). Fifth, we their emergence as a class *for itself*, evidenced in their action of jointly and publicly demanding their right to benefits.

Metcalf and Vanclay talk about three types of alternative lifestyle participants who are unemployed.⁴¹⁷ First, there is the group that adopts an alternative lifestyle as a means of coping with structural employment and who are likely to remain within the alternative lifestyle movement on account of having few opportunities to migrate out of that lifestyle.

The second category comprises those who left their jobs to develop an alternative lifestyle and who are relying on a benefit as they develop their rural alternative lifestyle. "To such people, unemployment benefits are frequently regarded as a form of rural

⁴¹⁷ Metcalf & Vanclay, *Social Characteristics of Alternative Lifestyle Participants in Australia*, 1987, 59-60.

subsidy.” The argument put forward is that they were taxpayers in the city and now they need the support, and besides, the straight rural farming community are subsidised in various ways. Some argue for an alternative living allowance to be established.

The third group are the people who choose to be unemployed and can live comfortably on their benefit, who don’t want to work and point out there are not enough jobs anyway – why not leave them for the people who want to work? Sometimes this is accompanied by a moral (ecological) criticism of capitalism for producing too many useless consumer goods.

Despite their different *attitudes* towards the dole, it is clear that all these persons share a common *relationship* to the state. Taken at a macro-level, these different political views intertwine into a more general attitude to the state and to getting a benefit, and are a sophisticated ideological defence of beneficiaries.

14.3.2 Issues of Inhabitation

The issues of housing, land-sharing, eco-activism and the right to stay became united into one political struggle.

The deep rift between the alternatives and the farmers can be situated in the political and economic circumstances of the time. During 1983-1984 the ecological fight was in full swing and there was a very strong division between the alternatives and the farmers. At the time the farmers were, as a class, opposed to the political and ecological activism of the alternatives. For some farmers, the only thing they had on their farms that was worth selling at the time was the stands of native timber. However reluctantly they sold it, the sale of that timber resource may have meant the difference between being able to stay on the farm or being forced to sell it.

The alternative lifestyle population were identified by their straight critics with the ecological battles over the remaining stands of native rainforest at Terania Creek around 1979. The fight for the forest was also a fight for their houses and therefore their right to remain on that land. The original settlers fought, through their representatives on the Lismore City Council, for their own interests such as the ability to mill and sell native

timber. They did this by challenging the material interests of the alternative lifestyle migrants, in particular the right to build on shared land.

However, opposition from a majority of Lismore councillors continued, and was strengthened as a result of the Terania Rainforest logging protest in 1979, mounted by local environmentalists who were identified with illegal housing.

Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982, 1982, 103.

As they became aware that an injury to one was an injury to all, they acted as a class *for itself* to protect particular dwellings or pieces of forest. This created pressure for formal political representation of the interests of alternative lifestyle participants in local body organisations, and some people within the alternative movement took on these tasks.⁴¹⁸



Following years of agitation for the protection of old growth native rain forest in the Terania Basin, forest supporters attempted to blockade logging operations in what become the first of a series of important national environmental direct actions. Many demonstrators were arrested including Nimbin's Neil Pike, captured in *Northern Star* photographer Darcy McFadden's award winning shot.
Photo: Northern Star. [Picture and caption sourced from the 1998 Visions of Nimbin fund-raising calendar.]

⁴¹⁸ See CLASS FOR ITSELF: Local body, state and federal politics, page 458.

The fact that the timber wasn't worth the amount of money that the state was investing in "protecting" it (protecting the right of the forest owners to mill it) showed to the eco-activists that the response wasn't a purely economic decision. There was the question of who was in charge to be settled. What right did a bunch of dropout idealists have to tell the farmers they had no right to protect their livelihoods in the best way they could?

We're sitting here asking for an Environmental Impact Study, that's all. If that's what is keeping 200 police up here for two weeks ... let them explain that to the electorate.

Earth First: The Struggle to Save Australia's Rainforest, Gaia Films, c1987.

The battle to save the state forest at Terania Creek from being logged was really a fight about who got to stay. For some straight farmers the battle was fought out on the same grounds (the right to stay) and a victory to save the Terania Creek forest contained an implicit threat to their ability to sell timber growing on their farms. The alternatives saw that it was a fight over their right to remain as the following quotes show.

More was at stake than trees. At the time the National Party dominated Lismore City Council was moving to block the further spread of resettler communities. The building that was going on then was contrary to the rural zoning limitation of one residence per 40 ha. Lismore City Council was preparing to bulldoze the houses of the resettlers. By standing for the trees we knew we were openly challenging the hegemony of the National Party. **Lose the trees and we would lose the houses.**

Dunstan, *Images From the Edge*, Position Paper, 1994, 2. [Emphasis mine.]

Terania Creek seemed to just be an unacceptable piece of behaviour on our part to a community that had decided to accept us and tolerate us to some extent. But to do that was like, pushing the limits too far. You know, we were newcomers. We didn't have any business deciding what happened to that forest. And all of a sudden the council was on our backs saying, "What are you doing there and you never asked permission to build these houses, you didn't have building permits. We're going to knock the whole place down." [Greta Seed]

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

Like their other class actions, the struggle to preserve the Terania Creek forest was fought out with legal challenges and with mass civil disobedience. The ecological protests mounted by alternative activities are examples of crowd force. They are

expressions of liberal anarchism, in contrast to the conservative attitudes and political behaviour of the “mainstream.” The same class agency that is at work during environmental blockades is also seen at Mardi Grass.

For five years they wrote letters, carried out studies, and held meetings. All of which did nothing to stop the Forestry Commission’s plan. And so, in 1979, 300 protesters finally placed themselves between the forest they loved and the logging company’s bulldozers. The government’s response was to send in 150 police.

Earth First: The Struggle to Save Australia’s Rainforest, Gaia Films, c1987.

When our neighbours called us and said the bulldozers are coming, everybody left the farm and went down there, and we all had a very strong commitment to the forest and everything else, I mean, that’s why we were here. And Terania Creek really clarified that. [Greta Seed]

Peace, Love and Burnt Rice, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

As I said earlier, the Homebuilders Association grew out of the threat to the way of life the alternative lifestyle migrants were creating for themselves.⁴¹⁹ A legal restriction on the number of houses permissible on rural land meant that many houses built on shared properties were illegal because they exceeded the “one farm house and one worker’s cottage” zoning regulation, or contravened regulations governing materials and building techniques.

We sat in the back of the Media Factory and had the first meetings of what was to become the Home Builders Association because we came aware that the zoning, the land zoning, was not what people wanted. People wanted to buy land and allow other people to build houses on it. So there was lots of land available very cheaply, but the zoning required that you could only build one house per 100 hectares.

Aquarius Revisited: Under The Rainbow – A Social Experiment, That’s History Programme, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1993.

The Homebuilders Association made an impassioned plea for the “right” of Australians to own and build a home (appealing to the mainstream ideology) and took issue with

⁴¹⁹ See HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTION: Voluntary work, page 189.

rules that specified the type of materials and construction methods on grounds of “individual freedom.”

The Homebuilders have maintained ... that the choice of building life span, materials and means of construction are matters of private design. ... There has been an earnest endeavour by people to house themselves, using the resources and skills available. These are scarce, and determination, enterprise and ingenuity take the place of money, expertise, and outside assistance. For many, it is often their first experience with building materials, techniques and tools. Re-cycled materials are often used, and bush timber, local stone, mudbricks, and logging and sawmill wastes are preferred over manufactured materials.

Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982, 1982, 105.

The Homebuilders Association conducted an inspired and humorous campaign. In the following account of a court case over how many walls a dwelling must have we again see alternative ideology (being close to nature and having open space) being expressed as material practices (architecture).⁴²⁰

So there was this court case and Murray required the building inspector to explain why for instance, a room had to have four walls. He said, “Do you mean to say that if Mr Seed won’t build a fourth wall he’s not allowed to have any?” And the building inspector had to admit that this was his understanding. And, so the building inspector said well, you have to have four walls because there’s dust and the rain can get in and the kiddies can get sick, and there’s vermin and so on and so on.

So when I was being questioned by the opposing QC ... this QC said, “Mr Seed, what about vermin?” and I said, “What vermin?” “Well, you don’t have a door, you don’t even have a wall, so any of the creatures can get in from the forest.” And I said, “Ah, the creatures! Sure, that’s why I haven’t got the wall.” And I explained how the bats would fly in and take the mice off the floor and all the different lizards would come in and sometimes even the potoroo will come in and raid the compost. And the QC said, “Potoroo, what’s that?” And I said, “It’s this little furry

⁴²⁰ When a building inspector was asked if there were any problems with houses collapsing, replied, “Who would be stupid enough to build a house that did that?” *Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982, 1982, 105.*

marsupial,” And he said, “A little marsupial comes into your house?” And I said, “Yeah, it’s great, that’s why I haven’t got a wall.”

And so, you know, everyone was trying to keep a straight face, the judge with the blue rinse was trying to keep a straight face, and in his final summing up Murray sort of said, “And as for the question of vermin,” and he put his glasses on the end of his nose and looked around the court-room for effect, he said, “Which some of us prefer to call wildlife,” ... and that was it, everyone broke up. And that’s how ... those laws changed. They were days of, you know, great social change and ferment.

Sensitive New Age Guise, Nearly Normal Nimbin, Gaia Films, c1993.

Eventually Ordinance 70, an amendment to the NSW Building Regulations, was ratified. Inexpensive solutions to the “problems” of meeting the legal requirements are often proposed by alternative lifestyle participants. For example, a handbook, *Low Cost Country Homebuilding*, written to assist people building their own homes, was published in 1981 by the Technical Assistance Group.

14.3.3 The Struggle for the Community Centre

The united action over the Community Centre again shows the people of Nimbin acting as a class *for itself*. Community workers in Nimbin are well aware of the impact and importance of their autonomy and the benefits of community ownership of the town as the following quote attests. Nimbin is unique in that the community as a whole owns a major part of the village and can therefore determine (as a class) how the village develops.

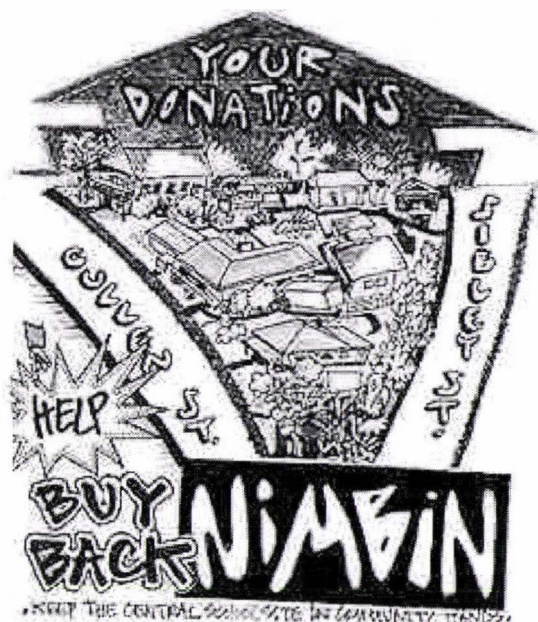
In late 1997, Nimbin Central School moved to a new and bigger school, vacating a 4 acre site in the centre of Nimbin. When the school site became available the Lismore City Council took out an option to purchase it along with all its buildings. The Council made the property available (subject to stringent conditions) to the Nimbin Community Development Association as a Community Centre for \$280,000, about half its commercial value.

The Nimbin Community Development Association (NCDA) wanted this land and its buildings for a publicly owned community centre. Opposing the NCDA were a handful

of developers who saw the site as extremely valuable real estate from which large profits could be extracted.

Community rather than private ownership of these sites will influence the development of Nimbin in a way that will provide the maximum benefit to the whole community.

Nimbin Community Centre Website.⁴²¹



This graphic was used in the campaign to purchase the old school site in Nimbin, now the home of the Nimbin Community Centre. The slogan, "Help buy back Nimbin: Keep the central school site in community hands," made it clear that the purchase of this property was consciously seen as an issue for the autonomy of the Nimbin community. Graphic: Nimbin Community Centre Web site.

Transformed, the old school site increased the amount of commercial rental space by about a third. It was essentially a conflict over the future of Nimbin and how it would develop from then on, and that is why it became such a hotly contested

issue. Bob Hopkins wrote an article for the *Nimbin News*, in which he dealt with the issue of the Community Centre with heavy irony.

Opposition from the town's landlord class [to the public ownership of the Community Centre] bitterly fought the acquisition of the centre claiming that people who acted in the interest of the greater community should desist so that these wealthy and self-interested individuals can continue to derive personal profit from the provision of such services. ...

[T]he "community" sector acts with a long-term perspective of what is beneficial to the entire community whereas the developers operate from the perspective of personal gain and short-term visions that maximise profit of a particular parcel of land without consideration of the social impact such developments have within the community. [Bob Hopkins.]

"On to the Millenium," *Nimbin News*, December 1998-January 1999, 3.

⁴²¹ http://www.nimbin.net/culture/community_centre_proj.htm

The agreement with the Lismore City Council required the Nimbin community to raise the 5% deposit (\$14,000) within three months, a massive undertaking for a small and cash-strapped population. This was followed by major fundraising efforts to pay the rest of the first \$140,000 within a year as agreed. In addition to raising the money, they had to create the legal and business infrastructures to run the Community Centre and to meet their loan obligations. Workshops and working bees helped plan the future use of the Community Centre and ready it for occupation. This involved a huge undertaking – planning, financial reporting, fundraising strategies, rent-setting, creating management structures, negotiations with council and funding organisations – all done by volunteers. The remaining money was loaned to the Nimbin Community Development Association by the Council, to be repaid over the next ten years.⁴²²

Then – just as the keys and contracts were about to be signed over – developers with other interests in mind, pulled a swifty with crony councillors ...

Nimbin News, April–May 1998, 9.

Claiming to be a sub-committee of the Nimbin Chamber of Commerce, a small delegation had addressed the Lismore City Council and reported that the Nimbin Chamber of Commerce was opposed to the NCDA purchase of the Community Centre. They argued that the activities of the Community Centre would be of “such a commercial nature as would pose a threat to the well-being of local shops and other businesses,” and that many of the activities at the Community Centre were not viable and therefore that the Community Centre would not be able to meet its repayment commitment.⁴²³ This action resulted in the Lismore City Council deferring the final approval of the Community Centre proposal.

The intervening fortnight saw angry denials of those claims and public rallies by supporters and prospective tenants, a petition signed by 70 local businesses saying they were not concerned about competition, and a partial back down by a sub-

⁴²² “Nimbin Central School Site Community Owned,” *Nimbin News*, June–July 1996, 3.

⁴²³ “The Struggle for the Community Centre,” *Nimbin News*, April–May 1998, 10.

committee of the Nimbin Chamber of Commerce which had raised the commercial concerns.

“Community Centre Victory For Nimbin,” *Northern Star*, 19 February 1998.

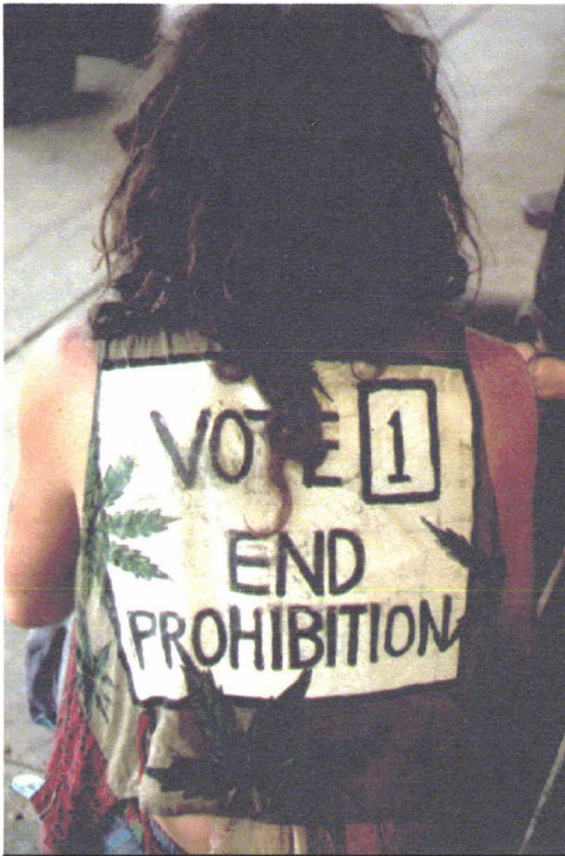
Persons with an interest in Nimbin who were not part of the 70 businesses that supported the Community Centre would have been easily identified. Letters and interviews in the *Aquarian Age* newspaper identify some of them as local landlords and business people, and alleged others declined to be named because of the fear of reprisals.

Eventually, the old school was handed over to the Nimbin community. It is a testament to the community-mindedness, the determination and the energy of the people who were involved, that they managed to achieve this goal within the deadlines set by the Lismore City Council. Not only that, they had triumphed in opposition to the plans of wealthy would-be developers who could foresee major profits if the land had been sold on the open market and subdivided. From their last minute activity, it looks as if the opponents of the venture were expecting the Community Centre fundraising and organisation to fail (given the near-impossible task that the Community Centre volunteers had been set) and were caught by surprise when the deadlines were met. The actions of the Nimbin Chamber of Commerce sub-committee have resulted in an intensification of the opposition to commercial landlords, real estate agents and property developers operating within the Nimbin area.⁴²⁴

14.3.4 Cannabis legalisation

The *class* relationship of the benefit peasantry to cannabis is another good example of how economics, when coupled to a specific ideology, comes to inform political behaviour. The importance of cannabis to this class requires the benefit peasantry to be

⁴²⁴ Again we see anti-real estate and developer sentiments expressed. See also LAND USE PATTERNS: Land ownership, page 200.



Campaign supporter for cannabis law reform candidate, Prohibition End.
Photo: Ben Rotteveel

anti-establishment. This anti-establishment stance is a cultural trait that is practiced by the alternative lifestyle group as a whole.

The real basis for the cannabis lobby is economic because the cultivation, sale and use of cannabis make a significant contribution to the economic survival of the group as a whole. It also explains why the anti-prohibition movement does not seek full legalisation for the cultivation of psychoactive cannabis crops, despite being cultivators themselves. The reason is that to maintain their *class* ownership of the cannabis industry they need to push for decriminalisation rather than complete legalisation. In this way they will not be

shouldered out of the industry by the better-capitalised rural bourgeoisie. This gives rise to particular political activities and not others. This is one of the issues on which alternative activists have become involved in the mainstream political environment, although typically, on their own terms and in their own way.

The campaigner who stood on an anti-prohibition ticket in the 1994 state election changed his name to Prohibition End, which, in the convention of listing surname then first name, reads “End Prohibition” on the ballot sheet. This is a good example of clever use of the media by alternative lifestyle activists.

In 1994, a political candidate “End Prohibition” (formerly Bob Hopkins) ran in the [Upper House] state elections. Naturally enough, the majority vote in Nimbin went to him, but in the whole area he received 11% of the vote. Not too bad for a single

issue party with a candidate who spent most of his campaign dressed in tights and a jester's hat.

Hemp Website.⁴²⁵

The sale of cannabis is a big part of the income of the alternative community, although it is distributed in a different (and to some extent complementary) way from the income that is derived from welfare benefits. I argue that fighting the present cannabis laws is what, as a class, they are compelled to do, regardless of the use or non-use of cannabis by any particular individual. That is why the alternative ideology gives cannabis a positive social and economic value and why it's seen as normal within the new settler community to use cannabis (although not all individuals do so).

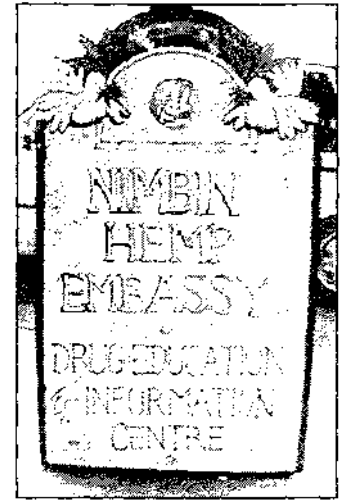
This has led to the politicisation of the issue and more pressure for appropriate legislation. The recent tendency for the surplus profit to fall on the single most important crop in the area underlies the reason why the demand for law change has grown so strong in the area. Some growers want police protection for themselves and their crops, and this informs the demand for the legalisation of small-scale cultivation. They can continue to grow small plots, and if someone defrauds them or threatens them over it they can call the police and expect protection. The demand for the right to grow a certain number of plants is the key demand on the *production* side of the fight for legalisation, as opposed to the right to have cannabis and smoke it, which is the *consumption* side of the legalisation issue.

The fact is that many people in Nimbin do not want cultivation of cannabis for sale made fully legal. They have a great material interest in preventing this outcome because if cannabis possession and cultivation were fully legalised they would lose control of the cannabis industry to big business, and the surplus profit they make from this crop would be lost.⁴²⁶

⁴²⁵ <http://www.nimbin.net/hemp/nimhistor.htm>

⁴²⁶ These issues were covered in *CANNABIS CROPPING*, page 228.

The Nimbin Hemp Embassy was established in 1988.⁴²⁷ It was set up to provide information and drug education and to be a political force for rational change to the drug laws. Over the years it has been extremely successful. Like many organisations in Nimbin, the Hemp Embassy has a professionally presented, well-organised and attractive website.⁴²⁸



The benefit peasants have shown their ability to form a crowd capable of resistance and capable of responding to police repression. The resort to the direct use of crowd force by the benefit peasants is a class mobilisation like any other. That crowd force is what defends their collective law breaking. It is when the people reach this state of rebellion that they demonstrate their class discipline and agency.

Mardi Grass represents a holiday from prohibition. Nothing can be done about it unless the police are prepared to make a real issue of it and the police don't see it as worth their while. Banning it wouldn't work – the first one was banned and still around a thousand people turned up. In a 1999 interview with the *Northern Rivers Echo* about policing cannabis use at the Mardi Grass Festival in Nimbin, a police spokesperson commented: –

“If the idea is to go down and arrest 5000 people for an illegal assembly, we don't have enough police in NSW to do that.” He called on the council to cooperate with the police and the Mardi Grass organisers to ensure the event goes off as smoothly as possible. [*Northern Rivers Echo*, 4 March 1999, 5.]

Dunstan, *The Background Story of the Nimbin Mardi Grass* (Draft 10 March 1999).

⁴²⁷ Photo sourced from the Website: Nimbin ... Hippy Capital of the Universe.
<http://rainboweb.com/nimbin.htm>

⁴²⁸ See <http://www.nimbin.net/hemp>



This photograph, titled "joint venture," shows that the Mardi Grass Hemp Festival represents a holiday from prohibition.
Photo: Ben Rotteveel.

This strikingly illustrates the notion that the efficiencies of policing are greatly reduced in Nimbin and a non-enforceability space operates. If a police spokesperson in Sydney were to say they couldn't disperse a crowd of 5000 it would sound ridiculous. However, the authorities would have to put the police on planes and fly them up from Sydney, feed and accommodate them, familiarise them with the local area, and generally make a huge song and dance about it. What this adds up to is martyring the people concerned. It would constitute massive police repression, particularly when the policing of cannabis law already faces a general legitimisation crisis, with 75% of Australians supporting decriminalisation.⁴²⁹

The Mardi Grass Festival is an instance of the direct use of basic crowd force by a class. By turning up in force they legalise, for the duration of the festival, smoking (and

⁴²⁹ A 1999 survey found that three-quarters of Australians supported decriminalising the possession of small amounts of marijuana. "Decriminalise Dope—Poll," *Evening Post*, 1 November 1999, 6.

trading) pot in the Nimbin area. The alternative lifestyle culture is well versed in this kind of confrontation, having used crowd-force methods in defence of the environment.

The Compassion Club is another salvo in the long tradition of pro-cannabis, alternative health-care activism that is co-ordinated from Nimbin. It is an organisation of persons who intend to supply quality cannabis to persons with a medical need for the drug. It is necessary to have a letter of referral from a health practitioner before patients will be supplied.⁴³⁰ The compassion club plans to supply mail-order cannabis cookies because it is not yet possible to get cannabis prescribed in Australia.

Penal reform

Penal reform arises naturally out of the illegality of drug use. The vast majority of inmates in Australian prisons (70%) are there for drug-related crimes.⁴³¹ The benefit peasantry as a class comprise a high-risk population for running foul of the law because using drugs defines otherwise law-abiding persons as criminals. “We are not criminals,” is chanted during pro-legalisation rallies, and the benefit peasantry united under the slogan: “When the law is unjust resistance becomes a duty.”

During a drug-related trial in the late 1990’s a local lawyer, David Heilpern, requested leniency from the trial judge for an offender who had pleaded guilty. The lawyer argued on the grounds that the man (a young, slightly built and attractive man with long blonde hair) was vulnerable to sexual assault in jail. The judge gave David Heilpern 24 hours to prove his contention that his client was at risk. It turned out that there was no current research on the subject – none at all on sexual assaults in Australian jails, and the United States studies dated back to the 1960s. The young man in question was sent to prison

⁴³⁰ Cannabis is renowned for medical benefits including the relief of chronic pain, the reduction of nausea due to chemotherapy, for easing muscle spasms common with diseases like multiple sclerosis, an appetite stimulant for persons with wasting diseases such as AIDS, for relieving sinusitis and related problems, and for the eye condition, glaucoma.

⁴³¹ “Prison Doesn’t Work,” *Nimbin News*, October–November 1998, 22.

where he was repeatedly raped and beaten during his incarceration. On his release, he tragically committed suicide.⁴³² In order to protect others David Heilpern did the necessary research and wrote a book called *Fear or Favour*, which was published in 1998.

Another engagement with the prison system was the Freedom Ride. In a purpose-painted bus, activists challenging the drug laws began a road-show advocating drug law reform in NSW. They called for an amnesty for drug war prisoners before the Sydney Olympic Games begin in September 2000. They visited jails in NSW to count “prisoners of the Drug War.” Their actions included roadside advocacy for law reform, regular media releases on the internet from an on-board computer system, a dedicated website, the burning of a cardboard replica of a jail, and broadcasting their message into the streets (and into the jails from outside the perimeter fences) over a loud-hailer system mounted on top of the bus.⁴³³



The attention-grabbing “Freedom Ride” bus. Note the website address painted in the slipstream of the dove with the cannabis leaf in its beak. The cannabis leaf is also behind bars – symbolism reminiscent of Amnesty International icons. The “social action” artwork was done by local artists Helen Rodriguez and Elspeth Jones. Picture: Peacebus Web site.

The Freedom Riders point to the continued failure of prohibition policies and make links to US-style legislation (with parallels to imperialism), to indigenous rights and reconciliation, to medicine, the environment and to the peace movement. We see multi-layered networks being established, tying a disparate group of

⁴³² “Legal Comment,” *Nimbin News*, August–September 1998, 19.

⁴³³ See <http://www.peacebus.com> website and “The Freedom Ride,” *Nimbin News*, August–September 2000, 3.

people together into a unified movement. Like other aspects of the alternative movement, there exists a unified core of ideological belief understood and enacted differently by its constituent interest groups.

14.3.5 Health & Ecological work

Campaigning for peace and for a nuclear free world is a thread that has run through the history of the alternative political actions. It informs their practice at every level, although it is expressed in more general terms at the present. During the recent period of détente, the level of peace-activism, as in activism on a specifically peace issue, has dropped. There are fewer marches for a nuclear free Pacific, fewer peace camps and peace trains. The number of articles in the *Nimbin News* dealing with the consequences of a nuclear war has dropped to nil since 1988, and instead, there has been an increase of articles showing a generalised concern for the world environment.

A concern with peace is expressed in terms of ecology and development issues, Aboriginal land rights (brought to the fore by uranium mining issues), penal reform and the environmental and health consequences of the Gulf war. Alternatives are also to be found at anti-imperialist demonstrations, and protesting social injustices.

The focus of alternative lifestyle peace activities has always been on saving the planet. If the threat of global nuclear war again becomes prominent, I would expect a renewal of specifically peace-oriented activism among the alternatives. For now, though, I have included their peace activities as part of their ecological work because saving Earth from nuclear catastrophe is a major environmental issue. This is not to say that there is no longer a peace movement, but that they are now active in most of the progressive ecological organisations. Since the end of conscription and the (last) Cold War and the destruction of the Soviet Union, the activity and focus of peaceniks has evolved to encompass a wider range of planet-saving activities.

Not only were the alternative lifestyle participants at the vanguard of the nuclear free movement, closer to home they spearheaded the development of ecologically friendly farming methods. The widespread and often unsafe use of agricultural chemicals by the

straight farmers and local councils was another point of conflict between straight and alternative communities. Articles in the *Nimbin News* showed how passionate people were about this environmental threat. Many of these migrants had come from the cities to get away from pollution and discovered that they were being exposed to high levels of pesticides and other agricultural chemicals in the Nimbin area. Health linked personal issues to global ones: the right not to be poisoned at home connected all the way through to a fight for human survival on planet Earth.

By 1966 Rachel Carson's book, *The Silent Spring*, was widely available and very influential in the burgeoning environmental movement. People believed that the indiscriminate use of DDT, 245-T and other pesticides were poisoning the earth. As the cover of Carson's book comments:

Her scientifically passionate exposure of the effects of indiscriminate crop-dusting with insecticides, of the destruction of wild life and of the balance of nature, of man's progressive poisoning of his own habitat, remains a classic statement which focused unease and founded a whole movement.

Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1977, back-cover. [Emphasis mine.]

As time has passed, many of these environmental concerns have moved to the mainstream. A simple matter of economics has forced a change of practice on farmers. Consumer demands for low pesticide residues in food have led to safer use of agricultural chemicals, as produce was rejected if it had too high a concentration of agricultural chemical residues. Australia's reputation for antibiotic, herbicide and pesticide-free food is largely thanks to the tireless efforts of members of the city and country alternative lifestyle activists. The growing social acceptance of ecological activism is shown when the forces of the state commend the actions of protestors trespassing at the residence of the Prime Minister. They were protesting Australia's stance on greenhouse gas emissions.

Judge hands out glowing sentence

Magistrate Scott Mitchell defended their right to protest, and, though finding them guilty, ordered that no convictions be recorded. ... Mr Mitchell also sent them away with glowing personal references to their integrity, good heartedness and commitment to the cause of the environment.

Dominion, 19 November 1997, 4.

Compare the treatment of the Greenpeace activists in 1997 to the jailing of activist Dean Jefferys, who dropped petitions and flowers onto the British navy craft, the HMS *Illustrious*, from a microlight plane in 1986.⁴³⁴

14.3.6 Ethical shareholding investments

Pro-environment political activism also takes the form of organising shareholders, and examining the environmental and employment records of big corporations. It represents co-operation between rural and urban environmental activists, linked together by urban technologies. The internet is a major advance for this kind of organisational networking and allows the rapid dissemination of information that might otherwise be unavailable (information that could be suppressed by the big media magnates).

The *Nimbin News* runs advertisements for the independent funds manager, Australian Ethical Investment Ltd, which was formed in 1986 and is based in Canberra. Around one hundred small investors, who share a commitment to improving the ethics of corporate Australia, own the company. The company donates 10% of its profits to voluntary organisations in the green movement.⁴³⁵ Another company, Ethinvest Pty Ltd produces a newsletter that reports on companies to be avoided on account of their environmentally unsound practices, for example, uranium mining. Ethinvest is based in Sydney and they too advertise in the *Nimbin News*.

⁴³⁴ *Rainbow News*, November 1986-February 1987, 4.

⁴³⁵ "Australian Ethical Investment Ltd," *Nimbin News*, February-March 1999, 34.

Some people strategically purchase shares in these multinationals to entitle them to receive company information and to attend shareholder's meetings at which they are vocal participants.⁴³⁰ It is this grass-roots awareness that informs investment and disinvestment by thousands of small shareholders, who, when mobilised to act can force change onto the business practices of large corporations.

While this might seem a bit piecemeal, such actions were reported to influence up to A\$100 million worth of investment decisions a year in 1996.⁴³¹ There is nothing to suggest that the level of ethical investment is diminishing, and coupled with the moral pressure to behave well, transnational companies are now being held to account for any environmental and health damage that they do. Bad publicity results in loss of share market value.

By exploring the ways and means of being good employers some people within the alternative lifestyle are again acting as a "think tank" for capitalism. Many Nimbin businesses strive to have different management structures and employment styles from those of mainstream capitalist enterprises. The Rainbow Power Company is one such example, and it encourages its workers to be shareholders. Its other shareholders include an investment company called August Investment that owns several thousand dollars worth of shares.

14.3.7 Anti-imperialism

The mobilisation against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) was one of the political actions that the alternative lifestyle community got involved in, and

⁴³⁰ For example, "Boral Green Shareholders," *Nimbin News*, February–March 1999, 23; Boycott Woodchipping Campaign," and "Unsettling AMCOR at Their AGM," *Nimbin News*, August–September 1999, 23.

⁴³¹ Trevor Lee, "Ethical Investment in Australia," *Nimbin News*, June–July 1996, 14.

demonstrates their tendency to anti-imperialism. It is presented both as a sovereignty issue (autonomy) and an environmental issue.⁴³⁸

[L]imits to foreign ownership within Australia will be removed, allowing foreign corporations to own everything – the land, water, minerals, fossil fuels, the media, schools, prisons, hospitals and social services.

“The Multilateral Agreement on Investment,” *Nimbin News*, April–May 1998, 23.

The column written by *Nimbin News* regular, Gloria Constine, picked up the theme of globalisation in the June-July 1998 issue. She criticised the International Monetary Fund for their so-called “recovery packages” that had left several Asian economies vulnerable, and linked exploitative “investments” in the Asian periphery to a weakening of labour and environmental standards. Her piece concluded with a fragment of alternative ideology – the notion that individuals can make a difference.

By the way, Paula Stern, former chair of the International Trade Commission, in her testimony to the US Congress, pointed to “strong, grass-roots citizens organisations who are retarding or blocking regulatory reforms.” Well, let’s stop them some more!

Gloria’s Rave, *Nimbin News*, June–July 1998, 35.

In 2000 the World Trade Organisation meetings in Seattle were subjected to protests and civil disobedience campaigns. At issue were provisions regarding trade barriers and sanctions, because they weakened the ability of sovereign governments to maintain local industry and workplace and environment standards.

It is apparent that a whole group of organisations are pushing treaties that will nullify regulations in member countries and leave them open and unprotected from the whims of the multi and trans-nationals.

Gloria’s Rave, *Nimbin News*, June–July 1998, 35.

⁴³⁸ The article included a Victorian contact phone number for the Australian Stop MAI Campaign and a website address for more information, again pointing to the organisational benefits of the internet.

The meeting of the World Economic Forum in Melbourne in September 2000 intensified the anti-globalisation activities of activists in Australia. The proximity to the Sydney Olympic Games proved to be an effective tool, as the Games organisers and Australian government were more than usually sensitive to dissension with



the worlds media focussed on Australia.⁴³⁹ Protestors link world environment, multinationalism and Aboriginal rights together, as shown in the photograph below of veteran protestor Benny Zable in his now world-famous protest costume, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.⁴⁴⁰ The August-September issue of *Nimbin News* had four articles on these issues, showing a large-scale engagement with the problems of international imperialism and multinational organisations.⁴⁴¹ These activities are co-ordinated – internationally, irrepressibly and inexpensively – through the internet.⁴⁴²

⁴³⁹ In a similar move, pro-cannabis activists have organised their convoy to protest at drug-related incarceration to coincide with the Sydney Olympics Games, and the “alternative” Sydney 2000 Hemp Olympix.

⁴⁴⁰ See “The Storming of Melbourne,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 August 2000. <http://www.smh.com.au/features>

⁴⁴¹ *Nimbin News*, August-September 2000. “Economic Globalisation: A View Through the Smog,” pages 25 & 34; “Global to Local,” page 29; “Australian Food—Foreign Ownership,” page 23; “Planet Takeover,” page 10.

⁴⁴² See the website <http://www.s11.org> for example.

The alternative lifestyle participants are explicitly anti-imperialist and their actions are successful despite their lack of connection with production (and with capital for that matter). They can fight successfully against imperialism on an *ideological* level, but not on an economic level, because they have no power on account of the fact they have no important stakeholding in capitalist production.

14.4 Local body, state and federal politics

The different material characteristics that cause the alternatives to vote differently to the “straight” population include their migration from an urban area, the different ways of earning a living in the countryside, and their particular relationship with the state. However, the political behaviour of classes is not just determined by their objective material interests. It is also determined by the interplay of the history, culture, ideology and values of that group of people.

So while it is possible, for example, that voting for a conservative (National Party) politician might accrue agricultural benefits and subsidies for alternative agriculturists and horticulturists, the sum of their cultural inheritance means that alternative lifestyle participants are still unlikely to vote conservative. Their analysis of where their overall class interests lie supersedes any short-term potential gain from voting National.

Over the ten years between 1990 and 2000, alternative political activists stood for electoral office – for example Freija Leonard ran for Federal Parliament on a Green ticket, a candidate called Prohibition End campaigned in the state election, and Diana Roberts represented Nimbin on the Lismore City Council. All these people defended the benefit peasant class.

14.4.1 Local politics

The alternative lifestyle migrants first made themselves felt in terms of mainstream local politics at the Nimbin Progressive association. This happened within six months of the pioneer Aquarian migration to Nimbin. This high level of commitment to the community has continued throughout the period of settlement.

Then on 18 October 1973 a meeting of the local progress association was held to elect new office bearers. The locals, outnumbered by alternative seekers, feared that they were going to be taken over. Wisely, the alternative seekers re-elected the president, treasurer and secretary, substituting from their own ranks for the position of vice president, tourist officer and press representative. Because they had not directly challenged the locals' position, the two parties were able to reach a mutual understanding and no major objections to the co-operative were given, making way for its registration.

Cock, *Alternative Australia*, 1979, 123.

The debates that raged over Multiple Occupancy regulations again show that when it became necessary to protect their own interests the benefit peasantry made their entry into local body and state politics as a class *for itself*. The continued existence of Multiple Occupancies as legal entities is the result of successful challenges to the existing land-use management and town planning rules of the local area by the alternative lifestyle community. Given that 80% of all Multiple Occupancies in Australia are in this region, it is perhaps not surprising that they have had such a high representation in local government.⁴⁴³

In every Lismore City Council election since 1977 there has been an MO resident elected as a councillor. In this time there have been four such councillors with the current councillor being Diana Roberts.

Pan Community Council Website.⁴⁴⁴

At the time of first settlement by the alternative community the zoning regulations, which limited the number of dwellings on rural properties, conflicted with the alternative lifestyle migrants' housing needs. This was especially so for those who lived on shared land and needed higher housing density. Many of them ignored the rules – neither applying for building permits (which in any case would have been refused, and would have alerted the authorities to the intentions of the owners) nor obeying building regulations (many of which were outdated).

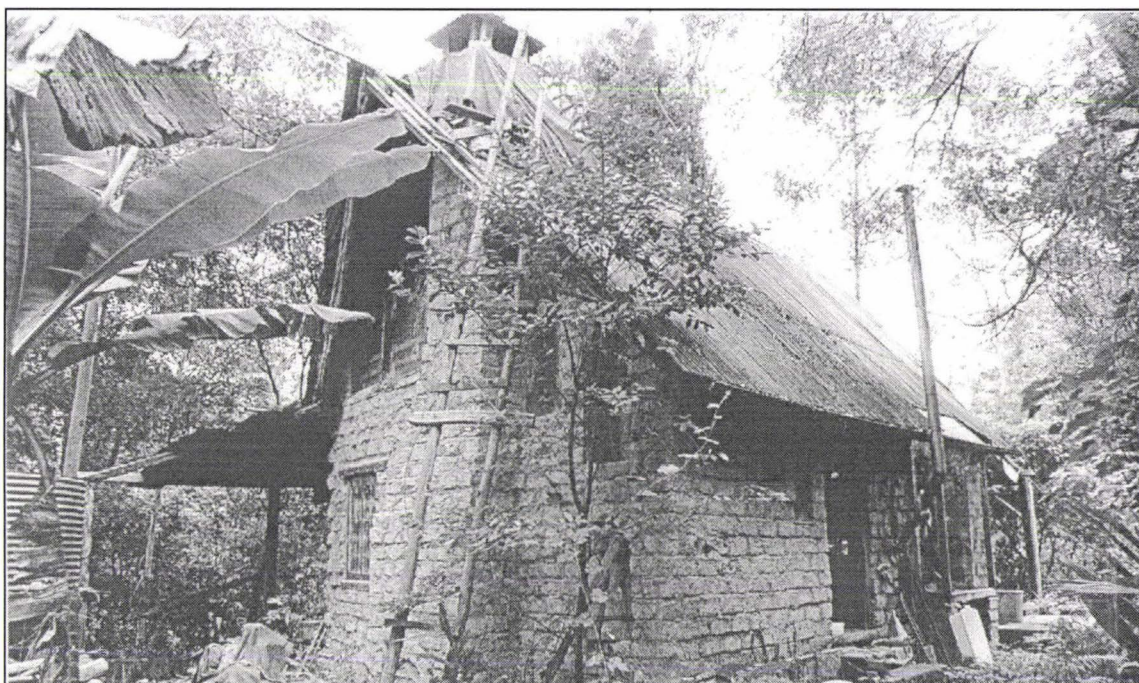
⁴⁴³ "Reinstatement of SEPP 15," *Nimbin News*, June–July 1997, 5.

⁴⁴⁴ <http://www.nor.com.au/user/pancom/pchist01.htm>

The conflict came to a head in 1977, when the Lismore City Council issued demolition orders on a number of illegal dwellings. The new settlers responded by forming a Homebuilder's Association, pledged to defend the threatened buildings.

Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982, 1982, 103.

With the co-operation of the Council a special dispensation was made whereby experimental buildings were permitted for the Tuntable Falls community land.⁴⁴⁵ The dispensation for “Special Residential Occupancy Buildings” effectively sidestepped the existing local-body building codes and zoning regulations.⁴⁴⁶



Many land sharing communities were established in the area with an emphasis on low-cost, owner-built housing. This house at Bodhi Farm [was one of] a number of dwellings issued with demolition orders. These were successfully contested in a landmark decision in the Land and Environment Court.

Photo: Northern Star. [Picture and caption sourced from the 1998 Visions of Nimbin fund- raising calendar.]

In 1980 the Lismore Shire Council held a referendum with the following question: “Are you in favour of multiple occupancy of rural holdings with groups of buildings having communal facilities?” The result was that 3,000 voted for the referendum question,

⁴⁴⁵ This dispensation was also granted to another land co-operative in Kyogle Shire.

⁴⁴⁶ *Nimbin Centenary 1882–1982*, 1982, 100.

12,000 voted against it.⁴⁴⁷ This shows that there was considerable local resistance to the Multiple Occupancy idea (one of the key demands of the new settlers at the time) from the straight population. It also demonstrated the urgent need for the alternative lifestyle participants to get enrolled to vote – if they didn't vote decisions could be made against their interests.

Despite opposition from the local straight population, a New South Wales state policy was introduced to allow Multiple Occupancy property ownership. It provided proof of the isolation of rural straights from the power brokers and decision makers in the city. It also showed the strength of the links that the alternative migrants retained with the city. The *Northern Star* wrote a bitter editorial.

But their opinions matter not one iota. All the vote does is point to the arrogance of a government that has made up its mind on this form of development regardless of the feelings of the people. [*Northern Star*, 18 March 1980, 4.]

Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 73.

The Homebuilders Association, after a series of meetings with the Council, prepared and presented a submission supporting “hamlet development.” The Council sought the assistance of the New South Wales Planning and Environment Commission, which resulted in a government policy (SEPP 15) that supported Multiple Occupancy, as the “hamlet development” proposal became known.

Activism by the alternatives and their representatives (on the Council, in pressure groups like PanCom, and by members of parliament) enabled the Multiple Occupancy legislation to be enacted, and worked towards its reinstatement after it was reversed by the National Party in October of 1994. Labor promised reinstatement of SEPP 15 but took until April 1998 to do so, and even then the legislation was introduced to the legislative

⁴⁴⁷ Taylor, *Retreat or Advance*, 1981, 73.

council by Ian Cohen, a member of the Green Party. At the same time Multiple Occupancies were renamed to Rural Landsharing Communities.⁴⁴⁸

14.4.2 State and federal politics

The alternative lifestyle participants have different voting behaviour (including a tradition of not voting at all) to the normal pattern for rural Australian voters. This is despite the fact that they share two major material facets of their lifestyle – both groups reside in a rural area and derive some portion of their living from the land. Radical green and anarchist politics separates the alternatives from the generally more conservative (National Party voting) mainstream rural population.

The Nimbin area was traditionally “National” country. The National Party is the junior partner in the Liberal-National right-wing coalition in both the State Government of New South Wales and the Federal Government of Australia.

The economic interests of a class serve as an environment within which their potential activity is selected. Over time, their political activity will come to be an increasingly good model of their economic interests.

The new values of the new settlers translated into a new political force in the region. The new people challenged the “progress at any price” politics of the National Party and, what was once the strong hold and the fountainhead of the rural conservative politics (a blue ribbon seat held by the leader of the National Party for many years), has become as a federal electorate, a marginal Labor seat which is held on the preferences of the green vote.

Dunstan, *Images From The Edge*, Position Paper, 1994, 7.

Where there is a collective, corporate basis for co-operation, the alternative lifestyle participants (the benefit peasantry as a class) can be seen as a united force. The serious weakening of the conservative National Party hegemony in the area is evidence of this.

⁴⁴⁸ “Reinstatement of SEPP 15,” *Nimbin News*, June-July 1997, 5. See also “Multiple Occupancy Victory,” *Nimbin News*, June-July 1998, 23.

The modern social (class) heterogeneity of the area is shown by the 1990 Federal election outcome in which the Independent peace campaigner Helen Caldicott, the Labor candidate Neville Newell and Charles Blunt, the leader of the National Party, all got roughly a third of the vote. The National Party had held Richmond for most of the century and considered this a safe seat, so the 1990 election result was a major upset. After the counting of preferences and the scrutinising process had been completed the Australian Labor Party candidate was elected. This result proved that the political and economic forces in the area had changed.

By splitting the National Party vote, I helped the Labor Party and Bob Hawke back into power. Had I known this would be the result, I would never have run in the first place.

Caldicott, *A Passionate Life*, 1996, 388.

Despite the victory for the less conservative Labor candidate, Helen Caldicott saw this as a failure: the imperfections of the Labor Party on environmental and peace issues were such that she did not see the election of a Labor government to be a better outcome overall than the election of a National government. In this she reflects the “no compromises” attitude of many eco-pax politicians.

14.4.3 Iso-votes

In this section I have a series of maps that show what I have called “iso-votes.” The lines join points of equal support for a particular party or referendum question. Iso-vote lines work in the same way as the iso-bar lines on a weather map.

As I discussed in the first chapters it has been very difficult to find data that is aggregated at a small enough level to find this community of benefit peasants. This is because the area they live in has no existence as a local government area or in any other officially recognised way (as an official ethnicity for example). On the other hand, the mechanism of locating people by polling booth data has the merit of finding (localising) this distinctive group in a way that identifies them as a class *for itself*.

The iso-vote maps are generated from polling booth data and concretely link the analysis back to the class *for itself* actions that are indicated by these distinctive voting behaviours. The alternatives' opposition to the straight farming petit bourgeoisie of the area, their opposition to National and their generalised anti-capitalism, their strong support for environmentalism, and their liberalism, translate into support for the Greens, for republicanism and of course support for changes to the drug laws. Their republicanism shows their relative disconnection from the traditional authority myths of bourgeois society and their attachment instead to different ideological priorities, for example equality and autonomy.

Methods

The data sets that were used to construct these maps come from the NSW Lower House state elections, except for the republicanism map whose data set comes from the 1999 national referendum. The first preference for the Green Party, first preference for the National Party and the republic vote were calibrated for each polling booth. This could not be repeated for the Federal election because it had different boundaries, and the NSW Upper House elections are proportional elections with a statewide electorate and not counted by individual polling booth.⁴⁴⁹

The maps were constructed by taking all the voting booth data for every voting booth in the area and plotting its exact location on a map. The data points were triangulated to form a faceted surface on which isolines were drawn at each 10% level of support. Areas between the isolines are shaded so that areas of higher support are brighter and areas with lower support are darker. An area that is black on the map shows 0-10% support for that political field, an area that shows as white on the map has between 90% and 100% support.

⁴⁴⁹ Federal and NSW State governments both have Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament. Australia is a member of the Commonwealth, and the Queen is represented by the Governor General. There are also binding Federal referenda.

The maps show the precise area in which the alternatives are concentrated. What they do not show is how many alternative lifestyle participants are present in that area. This is because the variable of how many alternatives are likely to vote compared to the straight population has never been measured.

Every polling booth is treated as equal to any other in the area. A polling booth is treated as sharing control of a particular area with its neighbouring booths. Halfway between one polling booth and another they are treated as equally significant, even if one of them is big and the other is small, because as *places* they are the same. No account is taken of the total number of votes at each booth because small booths represent their catchment areas just as much as large booths. The objective is not to count the actual number of votes (which is of course the task of the electoral commission and its officers) but to show the strength of the voting pattern in each place.

The software used to map isolines is a free software package called *Spring*. It has been put on the internet by the Brazilian government. The maps were constructed for me using this package by Brendan Tuohy and Harry Nowell.

Ideological field

These voting data are not ideas in people's heads – the votes at polling booths are physical pieces of paper that were placed in ballot boxes at particular locations – they are an exemplar of alternative ideology.

What we are mapping is a field – like an electrical or magnetic field – the value of which varies in space. A field is a well-defined scientific concept. Fields are variables distributed throughout a space and having a particular value at every point in that space. Continuous fields are ones where neighbouring points have similar values: the variation is not random around the field but there is a smooth variation.

All the maps show the same smooth pattern of variation, confirming that voting behaviours constitute a continuous field, as expected.

The fact that there are continuous fields has to do with the self-selection processes by which people select their neighbours (and which are highly class correlated). The migration of the alternatives into the area has been conditioned by the presence of alternative migrants already in the area. The new migrants, who have the tendency to increase the strength of the Green-voting ideological field, are attracted to where that ideological field is already strong. Consequently there is a (dialectical) tendency for migration to be driven by, as well as to drive the ideological fields, and that produces a positive feedback relationship in which alternative neighbourhoods form and become more consolidated over time. The data even shows that *within* the alternative zone consolidation has occurred.

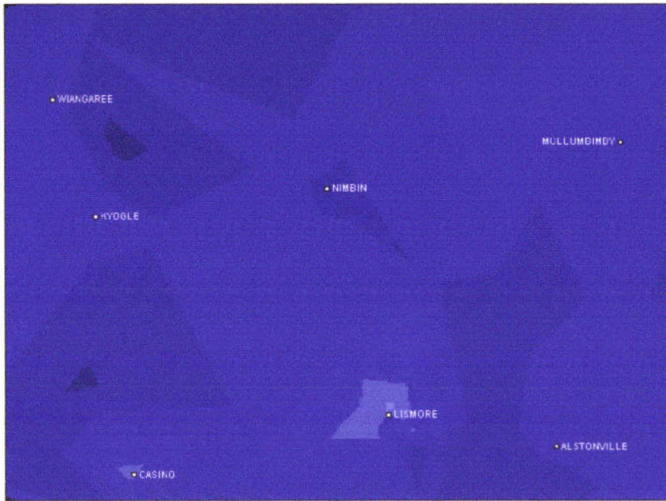
The maps show that the ideological fields for Green support, republicanism and opposition to National very closely correspond. The places where republicanism is most popular are also the places where the Green Party is most popular. This is why you can look at these as reflections of a single underlying process: in this case the migration of alternatives to and their residence in the area. So while not every alternative votes Green, the Green territory is dependent on the alternatives in the zone. Not every alternative is a republican (although far more are republicans than are Greens) but all the same republicanism depends for its relative strength in the region on the benefit peasants.

Non-National and National voting patterns

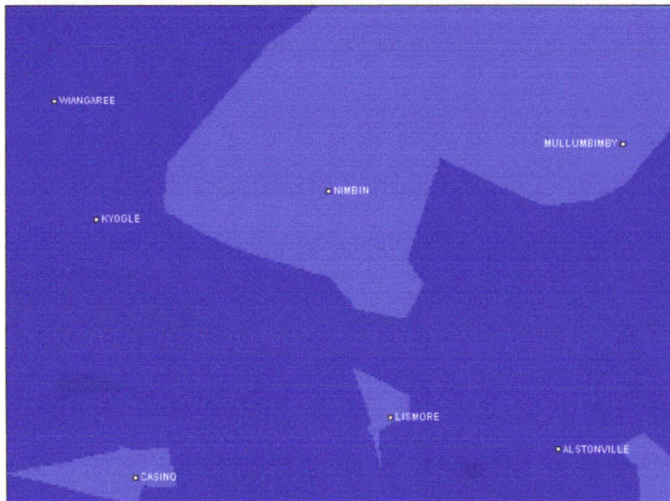
Election data from the NSW state (lower house) elections were obtained from the NSW state electoral commission for the years 1972, 1984 and 1998. The lower house elections were conducted by constituency and this limited the range of candidates standing.

I chose to show non-National support (the percentage of voters who did not vote for National) because this is positively correlated (rather than negatively, as National support is) with support for the Green Party and the republic.

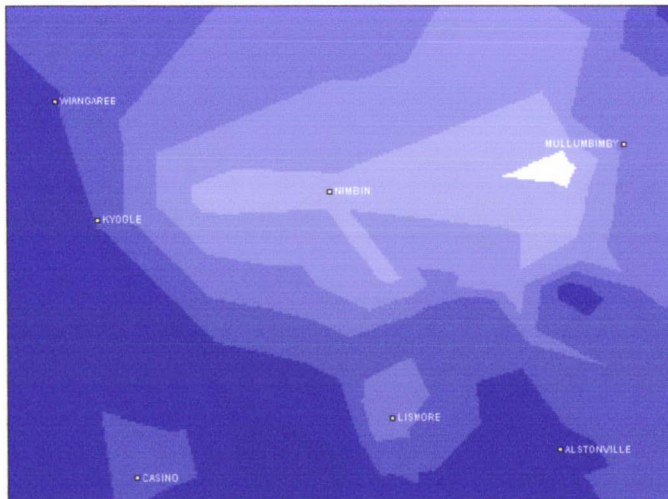
Green candidates did not stand in the local electorates in previous elections, so opposition to National (the non-National vote) is the indicator used to establish the history of the alternative zone.



1972 non-National vote



1984 non-National vote



1998 non-National vote

This time series shows a marked change in the geographical distribution of non-National voters in the area. Each 10% difference in voting strength is coded, from dark (lower levels of support for non-National candidates) to light (higher levels of support for non-National candidates).

Nimbin was National country in 1972, but by 1984 it had become a local stronghold of opposition voting, stauncher than the nearby city of Lismore.

By 1998 this anti-National zone had become more definite and had developed striking local peaks – support for the Green Party was four times the National Party vote in the Wilsons Creek area (a locality slightly to northeast of Nimbin towards Mullumbimby and shows in the 1988 map as a white area).

The 1998 peak of opposition to National near Nimbin was not there in 1972 and is a product of the migration of the alternative lifestyle population and their growing political influence. If you look at the non-National Party voting maps you can see that the 1984 alternative zone is a very large and diffuse area, covering Nimbin but not really stretching down as far south as in 1998 on the eastern part of the zone, so whereas the Wilsons Creek locality now has a very sharp concentration, it was on the fringe of the alternative zone in 1984. These maps show some of the processes of migration, changing land ownership patterns and prices, and changing distribution of alternative settlers.

The alternative zone has now crept down to have two southwards-pointing areas: one south of Nimbin, and the other east of that, with a gap (of National Party support) in between them. In 1984 only the western side of that shape was in evidence, and the eastern area has been colonised by alternatives between 1984 and 1998.

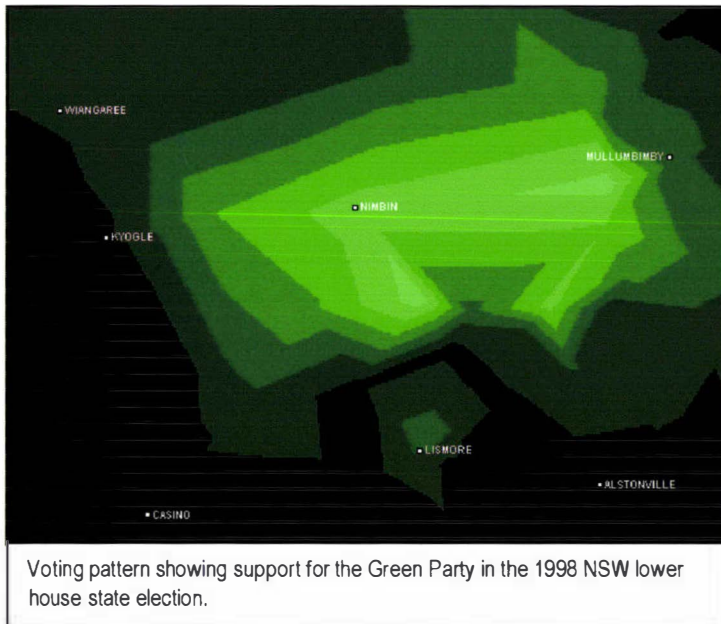
Overall National Party support has plummeted, but it has fallen a lot more in the rural alternative zone than in the rural towns. In the 1998 map the pro-National Party zone is much more homogeneous (there is less variation between country-town booths and rural booths) shown by the darker colour and small range of colours. Other clusters of “straight” opposition to National existed (and still exist) in the area, comprising mostly Labor supporters in the towns (especially earlier on, and in the bigger towns).

The biggest concentration (shown as light areas on the 1998 non-National voting map) of alternatives shown by these maps is south of Nimbin and at Wilsons Creek (which is a social locality rather than a geographical one). They are concentrations within a definite alternative zone: they form a structure that can be discerned within the area of alternative settlement. This structure is a recent phenomenon, it did not exist before the 1990s and it's not the same as the structure that existed in 1984. The entire alternative population has moved to the area since 1972, which the maps demonstrate quite clearly. There was no alternative zone in 1972, and in 1984 the alternative lifestyle zone had a different configuration to what it has now, and in particular had less internal structure than it now has. Much the same concentration pattern was evident in all three maps (of

opposition to the National Party, and support for the Green Party and for the republic) from 1998-1999.

Green voting

Support for the Green Party was measured by the vote for the Green Party candidate in local polling booths in the 1998 NSW State lower house election.



There is a very definite and localised peak of green voting which includes Nimbin but which stretches east of Nimbin as far as Wilsons Creek (the locality that shows as a light-green area southwest of Mullumbimby) and which stretches to the south as far as The Channon and Rosebank (the other light

green zone). This peak represents a local community of Green Party voters, where Green voting is much more common than in the surrounding area. It proves that there are two distinct populations in the area, one of which votes for the Green Party. In the same local area where there is strong Green voting there is also a peak of republicanism and opposition to the National Party.

This ideological field provides a better picture of the alternative zone than the republican or anti-National Party fields because support for the Green Party most clearly differentiates alternatives from all other local social groups.

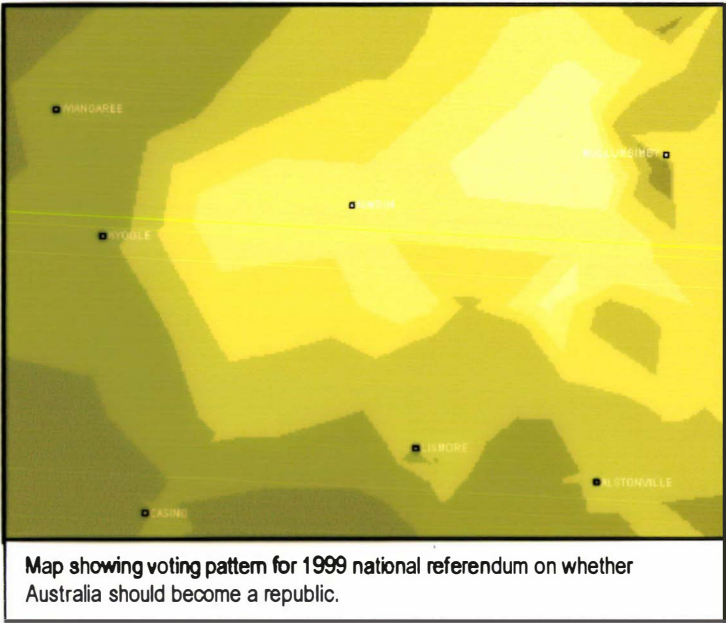
Republican vote

Data from the Australian Federal Electoral Commission was obtained for the republican referendum of 1999. Due to the construction of the referendum question, the republican option provided was unpopular with many republicans (as well as with monarchists) and the referendum was lost. Nevertheless, most republicans did vote for the proposal.

The 1999 republican territory iso-vote map coincides closely with the areas of support for the Green Party and of opposition to National in 1998.

Republican support is also at its strongest in the alternative zone. There are other minor peaks of republicanism in the wider area, for example in Bentley (which is roughly

located in a triangle between Nimbin, Lismore and Kyogle). This may represent a concentration of farmers of Irish (and other non-British) extraction voting the same way as the small enclave of alternative residents in the Boundary Creek area.



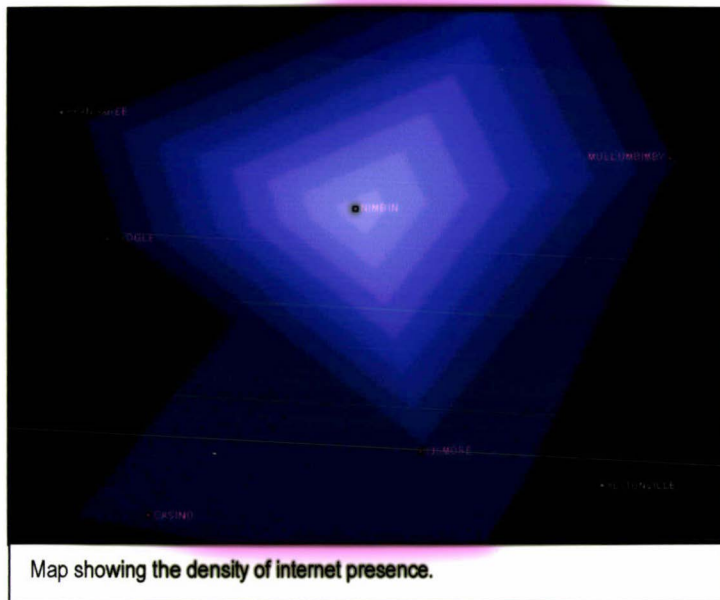
Iso-web-hits per capita

Iso-web-hits per capita is a measure of the number of references found for a town per inhabitant, which were reported by an internet search engine.⁴⁵⁰

There are fewer data points in the iso-hits per capita map since only places with unique place names were used. The need to select places with no other referents excluded

⁴⁵⁰ This survey was reported in COMPUTER-BASED WORK: Web-hits per capita, page 323.

many potential locations. An example of a locality that had to be excluded is the town of Casino, a search for which would have included in the total every on-line casino on the internet. The number of hits (using the Altavista search engine) on a given day was divided by the population of those towns obtained from NSW state government sources.



The iso-hits per capita also show a peak over Nimbin. Although the iso-hits per capita map does not have the same fineness as the other maps (because the number of data points is much lower) the general configuration is strikingly similar. Not only is there a peak over Nimbin, but there is also a trough over

Kyogle, and a secondary peak over Lismore – a branch of the Nimbin peak that stretches down to Lismore. These features are shared by the other maps as well, perhaps most obviously by the republican map.

Similarities between the maps

These profound differences in voting behaviour between the benefit peasants and the original settler population make it possible to delineate the focal area of alternative settlement to a level of detail far greater than would be possible using other available data.

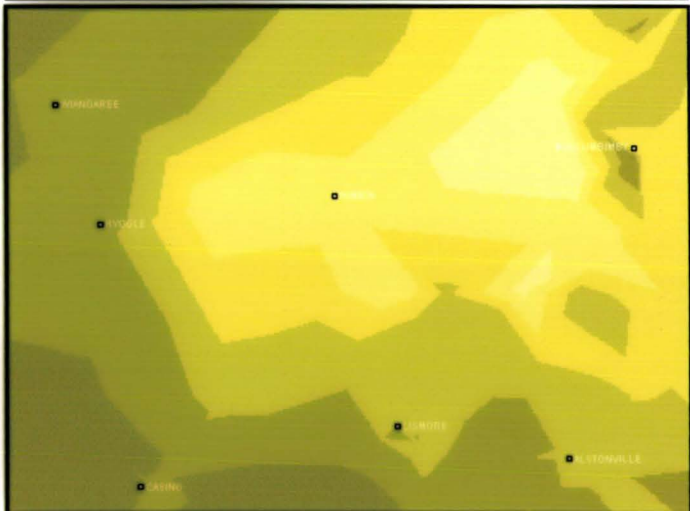
The three contemporary maps (the republican map, the Green map and the opposition to the National Party map) show that the locality has a population that is distinctive not just in one way but in three ways. The voters there do not vote for the National Party, they do vote for the Green Party and they are republicans.



The non-National Party voting field 1998.



The Green Party voting field 1998.



The republican voting field 1999.

Chapter 15. Likely Class Trajectory

15.0 Introduction

We are now in a position to see what will happen to the benefit peasantry as a class: whether the alternative lifestyle “blue print” and its associated technologies can be seen as evolutionary or revolutionary, and whether political activism by the alternative lifestyle participants provides a strong challenge to capitalism.

The alternative ideology is not a hegemonic or potentially hegemonic one.

Firstly, this is because it's not connected with large-scale industrial production. The only way that the whole of society could be organised on that basis would be to reject the existing material productive forces. The alternatives do not tend to focus on the real problems of adapting already existing large-scale industrial production to the needs of the ecology. Nobody believes Australia is going to change from an urbanised industrial capitalist economy into an economy dependent upon small-scale rural industries.

Secondly, they don't aspire to be a ruling class. Most alternative lifestyle participants do not make a claim to be revolutionary in a class sense, but only in the sense of revolution by lifestyle, as reformers of the capitalist system. Further, it is not in their class interests as benefit peasants to overthrow capitalist production.

Yet the local concentration of a particular class of beneficiaries in combination with marijuana consumption and production gave rise to an ideology that articulated several elements of their lifestyle and had distinctive features of opposition to the state apparatus. These features can be seen in their attitude to bureaucracy, and specifically to their relationship with agencies like schools and CentreLink, and in their production and use of cannabis. Their success when acting as a unified group gave them confidence and skills, and they have never failed to achieve some measure of change.

The early alternative lifestyle migrants tended to approach politics in terms of their own immediate interests – benefit entitlement, the right to home-births, environment

protection, building regulations, and for the communal dwellers especially, issues surrounding multiple occupancies and other forms of joint titles for land ownership.

They did not need to focus on the real problems of adapting already existing production to the needs of the ecology because they are mostly connected with non-capitalist production that is basically domestic small-scale local rural production. This derived from the fact that *inhabitation* was what they were in Nimbin to do.

As I have already pointed out, despite their aspiration for a new social order, alternative lifestyle participants do not generally link their futures to the world working class movement. In his analysis of the 1970s urban alternative movement, Paul Willis thought that aspects of the hippie culture meant that it was unlikely to provide a radical threat to capitalism. He identified their emphasis on individual over social needs; their subjective experience of things as being more important than analysis and theoretical understanding; the fact they saw a richness in poverty and had a corresponding lack of commitment to the redistribution of wealth; their distrust of the women's movement and their use of drugs, as factors that were likely to diminish their political relevance.⁴⁵¹

In many important ways the culture was tragically limited precisely by an inability to push through to the politically radical – the only grounds on which it could create conditions for its own long-term survival. As it was many of the important elements of the culture remained incompatible with a progressive political perspective.

Willis, *Profane Culture*, 1978, 127.

In retrospect, this view seems unduly pessimistic. When white-collar conservationists and the unionised blue-collar workers did co-operate, on real on-the-ground issues, they were highly successful. The “green bans” that the Builders Labourers Federation used to protect historically and culturally significant properties from development in Sydney in the 1970s are good examples of this collaboration.

⁴⁵¹ Paul Willis, *Profane Culture*, 1978, 129.

15.1 Potential for political alliances and class activism

The alternative lifestyle participants who live in Nimbin are socially connected to working class strata in Sydney with frequent migration backwards and forwards. They are connected in a way the straight rural inhabitants of Northern Rivers were never connected with Sydney.

The fact that the Nimbin alternative community was recruited from a fairly wide range of social backgrounds allows it to form a link between different urban strata. The waves of migration that have settled Nimbin, on the surface appear to have diluted the ideology but they have in fact provided essential linkage between urban activists, and the urban working class in general. This channel of communication is usually absent in urban life: doctors, programmers and inventors don't usually socialise with blue-collar workers or rural inhabitants. Migration to Nimbin has given a coherence to a collection of persons who are usually separated into different work-based social strata in the city. It also gives them a wide-spectrum link to the city population.

The Nimbin alternatives could play a role in a practice of alignment between those groups. The fact that the urban alternatives (workers) and the rural alternatives (benefit peasants) move backwards and forwards and talk to each other means that the alternatives could be integrated into a political alliance with the working class in a way that other rural populations can not. This could occur, for example, through a rapprochement between greens and unionised labour.

Benefits

Furthermore, there is the prospect of class alliance between wage-workers and benefit peasants based on a shared interest in the level of benefits and therefore of the minimum wage. A fight over benefits will unite workers and beneficiaries all over Australia, as they jointly defend their rights and could also help forge political alliances between different strata of the working class.

The links that the benefit peasantry have to other beneficiaries should offer protection – cutting off the dole to activists will draw in other beneficiaries to protect their collective

class interests. This makes the benefit peasants less vulnerable than you might expect from their status as a collection of benefit-dependent persons. Unemployment in Australia accounts for approximately 12% of the working population, and there are many others on other kinds of benefits, all of whom are united by their common relationship to the means of production (as beneficiaries). Consequently the prospect of wider class action to protect benefits if the benefit peasants were to be targeted by their class enemies is a significant deterrent. Already government representatives have resisted the pressure to cut off “trouble makers,” and the growing social acceptance of environmental actions also helps protect the benefit peasants.

The Department of Social Security did not target sub-cultures like the Nimbin ferals, the regional manager for Social Security, Richard Pauley said yesterday. ...

Mr Pauley said yesterday that while clients had to comply with department regulations, it was not the department's place to dictate to people how they lived. ...

The idea that the department investigate a specific group was a scurrilous idea, Mr Pauley said. ... “Where do you draw the line? Do you tell them how long their hair should be, that they wear a tie and a suit?”

“Dole Boss Denies Nimbin Targeted,” *Northern Star*, 26 May 1995.

At the moment the income paid by the state to the benefit peasantry is paid to them as individuals without expecting work as wage labourers. I think that this might change in the near future and that *corvée* might soon be extracted from the benefit peasantry in work-for-the-dole schemes. Work-for-the-dole schemes may also have the effect of further politicising this group as happened when other important features of their lifestyle were threatened. Such schemes would also organise alternatives into work collectives which would strengthen their resistance and organisation.

15.2 Personal to global class consciousness

Having established their right to remain on the land – having saved the nearby forest. and achieved reforms in land ownership, education, birth and health – the benefit peasantry might have settled back down to inhabiting their patch and not getting involved in other struggles. However, these struggles had drawn them together as a class

united by a common relationship to their means of production and by a common ethnicity. By acting in their class interests they started to draw links between what happens in their homes and global processes. Their local political actions have become linked to global political struggles.

Many aspects of the alternative cultural traditions have translated into criticism of the Australian state and its domination by multinational companies. For example their promotion of breast-feeding over baby formula led to opposition to Nestlé who were seeking to develop new markets for their baby milk in poor countries.

The alternatives challenged the Department of Education about the way in which children were taught. Concerns with medicalised childbirth led to protests supporting home birthing. The prohibition on the use of some drugs has generated a politicised concern with the nature of policing in Australia, with penal reform, and has led to anti-corruption activity.

Their actions to save the local rainforest led to attacks on their lifestyle and to a concurrent fight to protect their shared landholdings and the forest. This eventually resulted in state legislation (rather than local body regulations) to protect their land holdings and to the declaration of national parks.

Their “export” of rainforest protection expertise learned locally resulted in actions in other places. We can trace a connection that links the Terania Creek actions to global processes that imperil the world’s remaining rainforests. Involvement in rainforest conservation created links to human rights and democratic processes in places like Timor and Sarawak. In Brasil, Chico Mendez, a hero of the peasant land reform movement and environmentalist, was murdered by big landowners for opposing forestry interests. He was mourned by conservationists and land rights activists all over the world, including Nimbin.

This knowledge came about as they sought to explain why their struggle for conservation, peace and disarmament, new sources of energy and better health care always came up against opposing big business interests.

To fight for their rights as consumers they have to find out why anti-consumer policies are still being implemented – for which they have to “follow the money” – a process which brings them face to face with corrupt business practices and anti-democratic activity. They have to contend with the big bourgeoisie co-operating among themselves to manufacture consent (to use Noam Chomsky’s phrase). This brings the alternatives to a deepening understanding of modern imperialism.

We can see the opposition of the interests of the benefit peasantry and big business when we look at the Nimbin Seed Savers group. Their efforts to save unhybridised seeds require a struggle against agricultural industry giants such as Monsanto.⁴⁵² Similarly, the alternative energy company Rainbow Power is on one end of an economic chain that subordinates their activities to the ecologically unsafe oil conglomerates.

The lessons they have learned from their efforts to retain control of their own town and local environment have included ones on the economics of development companies and their relationship with government. This led to an examination of the corrupt practices of some of the leading players (for example, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, Alan Bond, Rupert Murdoch, etc).

It also led to an examination of what Australian companies, roused from the mainland, were up to in the Australian periphery – places like Papua New Guinea, South East Asia, and Fiji – and a close look at their health and safety records, their environmental records and so on.

Local fights for the rainforest have developed into political action against mining, timber and energy trans-nationals that harm the environment; their demand for safe food has made enemies of the pharmaceutical companies; their no-spraying demands have collided with agri-chemical interests.

⁴⁵² Monsanto are the company responsible for pushing for massive field “trials” of genetically modified canola seeds and putting at risk a \$26 million industry. See LAND USE PATTERNS: Boutique farms and sustainable agriculture, page 211.

The interests of the benefit peasant class now dialectically link and oppose them to the grande bourgeoisie on an international scale. The old *Personal is Political* philosophy has become a political force that has a life outside the individual interests of the people involved. It is in these ways that hundreds of links have been made between their ordinary daily lives and global processes. The sign under the mural on the Tomato Sauce building in Nimbin reads, *Think Global, Act Local*. Technological advances, coupled to their culture mean that they are now in a position to *Think Global, Act Global*.

International class alliances

Their links to progressive elements in the international working class movement (through their own work as conservators of the planet) have created alliances with the international working class.

As peasants, too, the subordinate relationship they have with the dominant mode of production makes them natural allies of peasants throughout the world. Their on-the-ground actions have led them to regard many transnational companies as their “personal enemies” and to forge political allegiances with people of the Third World. This has given them a powerful understanding of modern-day imperialism, or “globalisation” as it is presently called.

A global ecological awareness directed their attention to development policies, to world finance and to the World Trade Organisation (and its forebears). This information has led to support for affordable and sustainable Third World development, so poor countries are not crippled with debt and can do more for their people. The alternatives now have an analysis of modern imperialism, and we now see alternatives protesting at the mass demonstrations that now mark meetings of international capitalist organisations like the World Bank, IMF and WTO.

Technology

With the inexpensive and irrepressible power of the internet at their fingertips, the alternatives can really make an impact. They are uniquely well adapted to use this technology, pre-socialised for internet politics (e-politics) by their cultural traditions.

The internet will prove to be the organising tool that links and activates the alternative lifestyle movement (and its class, the benefit peasantry) to the worldwide progressive movement. Like the advent of rail communications in Marx's time, the internet is an important factor in political organisation.

Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battles lie not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers. This union is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by Modern Industry, and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another. It was just this contact that was needed to centralize the numerous local struggles, all of the same character, into one national struggle between classes. But every class struggle is a political struggle. And that union, to attain which the burghers of the Middle Ages, with their miserable highways, required centuries, the modern proletarians, thanks to railways, achieve in a few years.

Marx, *Communist Manifesto*, Marx & Engels Selected Works, Volume 1, 1977, 116-7.
[Emphasis mine.]

The development of e-politics echoes the developments that allowed the organisation of the International Working Men's Association. Improvements in the postal system and rail links between the European states that formed the core of the organisation made this "assemblage" possible. Marx talked about the fact that the "modern" means of communication had made it possible for the working class to organise on a national scale. Marx put forward the railways as the epitome of this process and my argument is that the internet provides the modern-day equivalent of this.

The internet has fostered organisation by providing a shared virtual location for activists all over the planet. Moreover, it gives a critical mass to alternative co-operation that might never occur in the "real life" physical world. The internet provides not means for discussion between people but also mechanisms by which they can engage in joint (unified) activity. Internet campaigns can be used to conduct political struggles in hostile media environments. Examples of internet campaigns include the "McLibel" case, the Australia-wide activism to halt the uranium mining at Jabiluka in the Northern Territory, and the fight to halt the Timbarra gold mine in nearby Tenterfield.

The hamburger giant, McDonalds, versus Steel and Morris case is a good example of the power of the internet. My internet search engine (Altavista) found the re-branded “McLibel” case over 48,000 times when I checked in January 2000.⁴⁵³ The case has everything: it is anti-imperialist, global, ecological, truth telling and pro-worker. In addition, the case has a David and Goliath quality: two not-wealthy people representing themselves in court against a US\$16 million dollar army of highly paid legal experts.⁴⁵⁴

In parallels to the McLibel case, the lawyers representing Timbarra gold mining consortium Ross Mining managed to inflict a \$400,000 court costs ruling on the volunteer Timbarra Protection Society. In doing so they signalled that it would be expensive to oppose them.

But there were fundamental flaws in their strategy. ... [They were] dealing with kooris and ferals who had little in the way of assets, nothing to lose and everything to gain ... It was a set piece: rich versus poor, foreign eco-pirates versus local eco-warriors, transient greed versus transcendent spirit.

Dunstan, *Timbarra and Making the Earth a Garden*, 1999, 2.⁴⁵⁵

Gloria Constine’s comments in the following quote about the World Trade Organisation and the organising capacity of the internet, support the contention that internet allows new levels of organisation. The internet has linked activists in rural Nimbin with anti-imperialists on the streets of Seattle.

On the world scene it’s finally getting through to the World Trade Organisation delegates that the populations of both rich and poor countries do not trust their process, nor their intentions with regard to “free trade” and globalisation. Of course the multi-national newspaper columnists give out their clever, twisted, vested interest spiel, but it doesn’t change the fact that its all geared toward more profits and the social, environmental and our so-called “democratic” process is demoted to a poor relation status - if its taken into account at all. **Thank goodness for the**

⁴⁵³ Internet search date: 25 January 2000.

⁴⁵⁴ See the website dedicated to this case: <http://www.mcspotlight.org>

⁴⁵⁵ <http://www.nrg.com.au/~graeme/timbarra.htm>

internet which has enabled the information to get out, to rally the people to protest this iniquitous grab for power at the expense of so many. (Late news ... WTO meeting abandoned. Yea to people power!)

“Gloria’s Rave,” *Nimbin News*, December 1999-January 2000, 35. (Emphasis mine.)

The internet allows co-operation in a Marxist sense, in that it permits organisation that would have previously only been achievable by collectives in a work place. Historically, this was achieved through the capitalist work nexus: until they were concentrated by virtue of the capitalist wage-labour process, labourers and peasants were isolated from each other, and in consequence they were unorganised as a class.

15.3 Class unity

Confounding my predictions of ten years ago, the fracture of the benefit peasant class seems less likely now than then. The continuance of the benefit peasantry as a class is assured if benefit entitlement remains similar and some form of legal restriction on the consumption of cannabis persists.

As I said, it was in the interests of capital to allow these activists to rusticate as a way of neutralising their political force. Now computer technology has provided them with a way to organise and participate in class actions from their rural paradise.

They have been battle-hardened, having learned the value of corporate (class) discipline and tasted the heady delights of mass disobedience (i.e. Mardi Grass). Their zeal, their flame of ecological righteousness, still burns undiminished: its scope has become more international, their analysis more thorough. Their anti-materialist stance has lost its more religious vow of poverty and now translates to quality of life for everyone. It is a useful cultural adaptation in political actions because a tradition of co-operation means that no one will starve on a blockade even if their benefit is cut off.

SECTION VII: SUMMARY

A materialist analysis of the rural alternative lifestyle culture

The conventional idealist approach treats social movements as if they are driven by ideas, rather than ideas reflecting the material basis of the society in which they arise. One of the challenges of this thesis has been to introduce a materialist understanding into the alternative lifestyle movement, which is presented as an ideologically driven phenomenon.

The answer to the question of how people's ideas direct their activity can be resolved with orthodox Marxist analysis. Ideologies are selected by the economic base. Ideas and institutions arise from activity – out of the actual practice of every day life – and this is conditioned by the means of production.

It is in this sense that I examined the alternative ideology, and it was in this way that I looked at alternative household production. Despite the notions of what life in the country would be like that many alternative migrants brought with them from the city, the actual reality of their material circumstances made some outcomes more likely because those outcomes were differentially rewarded or least punished.

I think the way the alternative lifestyle participants live – their actual relationship to the means of production – intersects with aspects of their ideology. In particular I looked for the economic underpinnings of their ideology that compelled them to do things, and to do those things in certain ways and not in others. Once the alternative migrants arrived, the evolution of the alternative lifestyle was *conditioned* by their social being.

A dialectical struggle is also being played out between the material and ideological forces of both the mainstream and alternative cultures. As they engage, each changes or resists the other in a series of actions and counter-reactions, on both major and minor scales.

I have traced the effects of the struggle between the rural and urban ways of life, and between the “mainstream” capitalist and the alternative lifestyles. I have discussed how the practice of these lifestyles has created and modified the ideologies of the participants, and how the ideologies have informed the way they have enacted their lives in a material sense.

Core-periphery processes underlie unequal economic development, migration and tourism. On the surface, the migration of the alternatives away from the city appears to be an inversion of typical (towards the city) migration processes because in their case de-urbanisation has occurred. My explanation showed how the alternative migration to the Nimbin area was made possible through core-periphery processes because a portion of the traditional rural population was expelled as a consequence of the decline of the traditional rural agricultural economy.

Migration

The first major contribution made by this thesis to the understanding of the alternative lifestyle movement is that migration is the primary class-forming process for this group of persons. Because the alternative lifestyle participants are migrants we see other, derived aspects of their class-forming processes – ethnicity, non-traditional rural living, land use patterns etc – thrown into view by their other-ness to the traditional inhabitants of this area. Friction between the new settlers and the original farmers demonstrates the existence of an economic boundary as well as an ethnic (cultural) boundary. It was more than just cross-cultural misunderstandings and different ways of living – those different cultural values had economic implications.

Alternative settlers came to Nimbin to seek a better life than they could manage in the city. The low but reliable income from the benefit has allowed them some financial security. They can enjoy the low cost of living in the warm and beautiful countryside of Northern New South Wales. Housing, food and heating costs are lower by virtue of being in the country and because the alternative lifestyle participants have the resources (nature and time) to do much of the necessary work for themselves.

Many alternatives can be seen as professional inhabitants: it is what they “do for a living,” and by just being there they can qualify for a benefit. The cultural priorities of this group can be linked to the self-selection of these people to migrate to Nimbin, and how people actually live when they get there.

I see this migration as a compulsory migration undertaken voluntarily by a self-selected group within the urban working class. This runs counter to the idea that moving to Nimbin was a voluntary action, dissociated from capitalist economic processes. I have explained why this migration was tolerated and necessary to the capitalist ruling class.

By leaving their proletarianised lives in the cities, the early alternative lifestyle participants became politically and economically marginalised. Their out-migration from the cities can be seen as a mechanism for dealing with a discontented and vocal cohort of the white-collar working class, and with unemployment in general. In the cities, they were politically effective, organising and participating in mass mobilisations such as the anti-Vietnam rallies, ban the bomb, women’s liberation actions, environmental protests, and agitating for better working conditions. Instead, they were paid a stipend to inhabit the rural periphery and for a time they disappeared from view as a political force.

Boundary

The answer to the question of how to identify the alternative lifestyle participants lies in considering the processes that unite them as a group rather than their attitudes and behaviours as individuals.

I established migration as the primary class-forming process, and then identified the related but derived features of the alternative lifestyle in order to draw a boundary between them and their more mainstream rural neighbours. These features form a matrix of interacting characteristics, not all of which need be evidenced in every individual, but can be seen to be typical of the group as a whole. These characteristics include having migrated to Nimbin from an urban area; having a non-traditional means of earning a living in the country; different land-ownership structures and land usages; the

recreational use of prohibited drugs; being beneficiaries; having a different class background; having a higher than average educational level; having different political priorities and a different (ethnic) culture from the host community.

Using the matrix of interacting characteristics of the alternative lifestyle as a way to theorise real-life boundaries allows us to incorporate a complex of interacting material and cultural features into a definition of a class or cultural group. Migration is the main process in which various sub-processes are closely bound together. These common attributes have been linked to aspects of migration as the overall class-forming process – as sub-processes of that process.

I have argued that it is necessary to refer to material lifestyles as they are *lived* to explain the alternative lifestyle. By doing this I was able to discard ideas like the suggestion that the alternative migration was a non-economic migration, and that the alternative lifestyle is apolitical or not class-based.

I have shown that the alternative ideology is actually a composite of ideologies that united the benefit peasantry without it being the same for everyone. The broad base of agreement has come about as it has been forced to accommodate and assimilate ideas from a wide range of persons from different backgrounds. It is the *material* practices, underpinned by a common relationship to the economy, which unites the alternative lifestyle participants into a social group.

There has been an intensification of the use of ethnic symbols as self-conscious cultural practice. I have argued that all these things are identifiable in the alternative lifestyle community living around Nimbin and that this consciousness was engendered by their otherness to the economic and cultural norms of the mainstream. They have genuinely distinct material interests and requirements, and their class-consciousness was engendered by their struggles to remain there (most notably the environmental fights). Their ethnic identity has been both threatened and heightened by the growing influence of tourism in the economy of Nimbin.

This awareness of a distinct ethnicity can have several interacting effects. First, it can engender a sense of a corporate class-consciousness and an awareness of shared interests. This results in a sense of collectivity, a sense of being, in Marx's sense, a class *in itself* – which in certain (usually economic) circumstances can result in the politicisation of the group and its acting on behalf of itself, as a class *for itself*.

What alternative lifestyle people do

Examining what alternative lifestyle participants do for a living leads us to the conclusion that they inhabit the land, and their production is, like more traditional peasants, primarily for their own households. I have shown that the rural alternatives live a marginal land-based lifestyle that is not fully articulated with the capitalist mode of production. I have also argued that much of the alternative lifestyle participants' activity has an economic value not evaluated by standard capitalist calculations.

I describe how the work done by alternative lifestyle participants in developing their lifestyle – in creating a new way of living – brings with it major improvements to the environment, to health and education practices, and to the development of the community. That work is usually unpaid or paid for only through the agency of state benefits. The rural alternative lifestyle settlers have a sophisticated ideology regarding state support for their lifestyle. It encompasses the notion that what they are doing (creating a new way of living) is work and that it is right that they should be paid (benefits) to do it.

Domestic-focussed activity

The alternative lifestyle allows us to re-evaluate the domestic labour debate from which I conclude that a way of life imposes its own logic regardless of the ideas and attitudes brought to that lifestyle by its participants.

The question of the reversion to a more gendered division of labour is largely explained by lifecycle changes (in particular, raising families) coupled to the low-tech, low-income material basis of alternative production. I argue that a more gendered division of labour was the natural (easiest) solution available to many of these households given their

resources, short of leaving Nimbin and returning to the city, and that an ideology that promoted those activities as worthwhile things to do was a positive consequence.

The primitive physical circumstances demand that a high level of domestic labour be performed in the absence of the “labour saving” devices available to well-off workers (including flush toilets). The case study of “who will dig the latrine pits” showed these reformulations (and their ideological supports).

I pointed to the fact that capitalist production engenders the need for an educated workforce, and suggested that one of the major industries in Nimbin was the production of children as future workers. The alternative lifestyle population, on the whole, is extremely well educated by Australian standards (in the sense of having academic qualifications) and they “produce” (and reproduce) the right kind of worker for this “market.” They are educated, articulate, literate, lateral thinking individuals who co-operate with other workers.

I looked at how the household-focussed mode of production undertaken by the alternative lifestyle participants gave them expertise in certain important areas. As they strove for a higher level of personal autonomy, unattainable in the city, they learned the skills necessary to achieve this. For example, the fact of many of them having children created the demand for an alternative to high-intervention hospital births. When these children got to be school age, their parents became involved in their education. The self-provision of housing meant that some people developed expertise in aspects of alternative housing construction (design, building and legal expertise). At the same time they developed the ability to generate political pressure to protect their interests. Again we see evidence of people’s real material lives giving rise to their political interests and ideologies, and of how over time those interests are modified.

Organisations like Birth and Beyond carried aspects of the alternative ideology into practical activities – promoting better relationships, home-birth, and holistic health care. In doing so the alternative lifestylers mounted a challenge to mainstream models of birth and health, and took on some major economic and political interests in the health sector. Actions like these are at the same time political as well as domestic activities.

Land use

The alternative lifestyle participants were shown to have a different relationship to the means of production to that of the earlier straight farming settlers. I have pointed out that the existence of identifiable groups that get their living off the land in different ways is one of the proofs of a class *in itself* in the Marxist sense. Further, I have shown that being members of a subordinate and non-capitalist class within a dominant capitalist mode of production gives the benefit peasantry a genuine lived opposition to the capitalist class system and its economy.

The benefit peasants derive the majority of their cash income from a benefit, and inhabitation in the area entitles them to one by virtue of the high level of unemployment in the region. Traditional agricultural commodities for sale are not generally produced (except for cannabis which is a special case because it is illegal).

Their first pro-forest actions were also their defence of the lifestyle as a class action: by standing in front of the bulldozers they protected their material interests. If they had been unable to build on their land, they would not have been able to stay and their land would have been worthless to them as a source of income, either through benefit entitlement or land-based production. This ecological work was at the same time a political and economic defence of home and hearth, and a more general pro-environment political action.

Ecological protection is another activity that alternative lifestyle people do, although again it is seldom waged work. Passive inhabitation has an economic value not usually measured by capitalist indices.

Despite the low levels of production for mainstream capitalist markets, the alternative way of life has economic benefits that make it worth doing. One of the most important facts that this thesis has argued is that passive land use (inhabitation) and environment protection has an economic value that until recently had not been acknowledged.

Economy & cannabis

I have looked at the actual connections between cannabis and the alternative lifestyle movement. I have not only justified my depiction of cannabis use and production as one of the defining characteristics of the benefit peasantry, but I've also shown how important it is culturally and economically.

I linked the discussion of cannabis production to Marx's theory of ground rent. I did this to explain why cannabis is profitable to grow in Nimbin, and not in other similar (or even more climatically favoured) rural areas. Nimbin has an advantage because it has a unique social environment in which to grow cannabis.

The growing of cannabis as a cash crop is demonstrably state-subsidised because the price of cannabis is supported by governmental actions. The state subsidises the production of cannabis first by maintaining a minimum living income via benefits, and second by maintaining the minimum price of the commodity through prohibition.

This structures their class relationships because the illegal status of cannabis production prevents the transformation of dope-growers into an ordinary commodity-cropping petit-bourgeoisie. The cannabis crop is officially outlawed, but the state maintains a premium price for the crop through prohibition.

As a class, they have a common focus of organisation regarding cannabis legalisation. Cannabis law reform is one of the key areas where this political difference is being fought out at the moment and represents the economic interest that the alternatives have in the hemp industry. The change from "legalise" to "decriminalise" has signalled a changed understanding of their economic position. However, there has been considerable debate over the growing and selling of cannabis within the alternative lifestyle community as a whole, particularly as the social costs have mounted from prohibition.

Tourism

The fact that drug tourism and eco-tourism are both major earners for Nimbin is no accident. The existence of a cluster of alternative migrants as a distinct and interesting cultural group, and their particular lifestyle (including their pro-cannabis culture) also attracts tourists. Saving the Terania Creek forest is a struggle that has come to be re-viewed as a positive economic contribution made by the alternative lifestyle community for the benefit of the region as a whole.

The development of Nimbin as a tourism destination is shaped, not only by standard core-periphery processes, but also by their presence as a distinct population with vested interests in their way of life. The alternative community in Nimbin resists, if not entirely, at least in part, the more damaging and negative impacts of the tourist industry on their way of life.

Nimbin enjoys an unusually high level of self-determination with regard to the development of their community because of their communal ownership of large areas of the central business district. Further, the illegality of cannabis means that the popular Mardi Grass festival is publicly-owned property too, in so far as it cannot be captured by individual private interests until such time as cannabis is legalised. This autonomy gives the community a cohesion and therefore strength.

Other industries

The separation between agriculture and manufacture – or really, between rural (agriculture) and urban (manufacture) – is no longer so clear-cut in places like Nimbin, as the requirements of modern manufacture are often compatible with rural living.

The way that industries in Nimbin develop is a consequence of their practical isolation from the productive forces of society. The production engaged in by the alternative lifestyle participants is determined by their position as benefit peasants within capitalism and propped up by a legitimating ideology and is typically local, small-scale and not fully capitalised.

The alternative economy in the Northern Rivers subsidises the research and development industry by producing solutions to environmental problems at bargain-basement rates. This is extremely important work, and has major economic implications. The alternative lifestyle population (mostly the benefit peasantry) subsidise the core economy by performing quality “child-rearing” at low cost by educated parents. Both of these industries have been transferred from the core back to the rural periphery, where they can be conducted more cheaply and involve non-capitalist modes of production.

Contribution to class analysis

In contrast with other alternative lifestyle theorists I see the Nimbin group as a local *class* rather than a moral movement comprised of *individuals*. This provides the basis for my contention that the alternatives are not only peasants, but also that the lifestyle is state-subsidised and they are specifically *benefit peasants*.

I have determined their class location as being a micro class (rather than a simple schism of one of the two fundamental classes of capitalism) on account of the fact they exist outside the normal processes of labour-capital.

I have argued that subsidies link beneficiaries, croppers, eco-activists and retailers into a single class group: the benefit peasantry. For beneficiaries of all kinds they can be seen as getting a direct state subsidy. For other persons who are dependent upon the Nimbin economy, for example, tourism-related work, the viability of their income is maintained by the presence of the alternatives. For croppers this linkage to subsidies happens through the surplus profit extracted from ground rent (in so far as it is more profitable to grow cannabis in and around Nimbin) because anti-drugs activity by the police maintains the price. Many cannabis croppers are also beneficiaries in their own right, the state providing a minimum income.

The question about their class group is resolved in terms of a micro-class, the benefit peasantry. This is a distinctive local lumpenproletariat, dependent on peculiar forms of collective property.

My theorisation that beneficiaries and pot growers form a single class group comes from considering benefits and the premium price for the cannabis crop as forms of rent-bearing collective property. Both property forms are enforced by the state in a contradictory way. It must pay benefits and reward cannabis cultivation even though it would rather not. These are forms of property the state “finds itself obliged” to enforce.

This new class location persists only as long as the benefit peasants remain in the countryside, and is the product of their particular way of life – their alternative mode of production – which they pursue while resident on the land. Their return to the city would usually transfer them back to the class category of worker, available for reintegration into the fully capitalist milieu of modern industrial production.

The formation of a “local class” is the consequence of the migration of urban proletarians to a rural non-working lumpenproletariat. Moments (aspects) of that process including migration, drug use, benefit dependency, rejection of wage-slavery, eco-activism, are part of the matrix of class forming processes that *define* the benefit peasantry class.

This analysis of the alternative lifestyle group relates their cultural traits to their economic position as a distinctive class. It has shown that the alternatives have a particular and distinctive form of class-consciousness. They have an ideology that distinguishes them from other classes, and further, they have a perception that their ideology does distinguish them. This translates into a corporate consciousness as a benefit peasantry class, which in turn translates into particular ideological, economic and political practices. When the class begins to act, corporately, in its own interests, it becomes in the Marxist sense a class *for itself*.

The rise of the benefit peasantry as a class *in itself* flowed from their shared relationship (as a corporate group) to the means of production. Their transformation into a class *for itself* came out of their battles to remain in the area.

Class-consciousness is elicited when the group is threatened by outside forces. The early environmental fights over logging Terania Creek, and then over the number of

dwellings, and building permits and standards, were the focus of the alternative versus mainstream split. The Multiple Occupancy, environment, and cannabis decriminalisation struggles chart specific social, political and economic concerns. These are the issues that inform voting patterns for alternatives.

The unity of these migrants into a class acting for itself can also be shown in election results. The iso-vote maps showed the proportion of votes that were cast in a particular way in a particular place. The point of doing the map was to locate the alternatives geographically as a class *for itself*. The iso-vote maps showed a local class of political actors who act in a particular way, who are clumped around Nimbin, and who differ from their neighbours in not just one, but four ways (being non-National voters, pro-Green, republican and highly computer literate).

The alternative lifestyle participants are (economically) dependent on the continued existence of capitalism: without it, their way of life is insupportable. This puts them in a contradictory position regarding the state: they are both dependent upon it in order to exist, and have a tradition of opposition to it.

Their class trajectory is to a large extent dependent upon the outcome of changes to laws governing benefit entitlement, upon the future of cannabis law reform, and to a lesser degree upon favourable rural land-sharing regulations.

Successfully challenging the capitalist mode of production would involve replacement of the dominant system of production relations, for example, taking on the task of organising social production (an impossibility for a class systematically isolated from labour under the dominant mode of production). Effective political action by benefit peasants against the capitalist system could only come with political alliances with the urban working class and with other peasant groups.

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